

THE BEAST BY IVAR

Fantastic

ADVENTURES



PIT ON GANYMEDE

Alexander Blade

NOW

Two Great Magazines

combined—

in NEW Digest Size

fantastic



All future issues of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES will be merged with FANTASTIC, the brilliant new magazine of science-fantasy in the popular digest size!

This is the last issue of
FANTASTIC ADVENTURES
in the present format.

Read the new FANTASTIC! Every issue will bring you the best works of old favorites as well as a choice selection of outstanding stories by the world's great masters — all color-illustrated by leading artists!

fantastic

May-June Issue On Sale March 10

— great stories by William P. McGivern —
Alfred Bester — Isaac Asimov —
John Wyndham

PLUS a classic reprint —
"Johnny Pye and The Fool-Killer"
by

Stephen Vincent Benet

Look for the new

fantastic

Digest-size — your best science-fantasy value

bi-monthly

at newsstands everywhere.



Next Issue—Handy Digest Size!

AMAZING

STORIES

THE ARISTOCRAT OF SCIENCE FICTION.

Features

▶ "SLICK" STORIES BY BIG-NAME AUTHORS!

COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOP ARTISTS!

In the April-May Issue:

▶ **MARS CONFIDENTIAL**

by Jack **Lait • Lee Mortimer**

America's masters of exposé now give you the hilarious red-hot and low-down on Mars! Read about Mars' sin spots—the crooked politics—and the far flung Mafia Plan for universal conquest!

Thrilling Futurama by Favorite Authors:

▶ **RAY BRADBURY ROBERT HEINLEIN**

H. L. GOLD THEODORE STURGEON

— AND OTHERS

A Sure Sellout At All Newsstands

ON SALE ▶

FEBRUARY 10

Reserve your copy now!

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

STARTING with the May-June 1953 issue (on sale March 10), FANTASTIC ADVENTURES becomes part of the digest-size magazine FANTASTIC. It is with a great deal of nostalgia that we of the staff write our last words for these final issues of our pulps—both FA and AMAZING STORIES. And it is with a great deal of exciting anticipation that the Fiction Group goes digest-size with all its magazines.

IT WAS early in 1939. AMAZING STORIES, Ziff-Davis' only stf magazine, was the undisputed leader of the science-fiction field. Why not a sister magazine combining fantasy and science fiction? Ray Palmer discussed the idea with Messrs. Ziff and Davis.

AND SO FANTASTIC ADVENTURES was born—in May of 1939. Started as a bi-monthly, popular demand turned the magazine into a monthly in less than eight months (January 1940). Until June 1940, FA was published in the large size—8 1/2"x11"—with trimmed edges. With that issue, it turned to the then more popular pulp size, where it has remained until today.

WHO WERE some of the contributing names that started FA and kept it going as a leader? Many of you will remember the exciting first issue—with Eando Binder, Ross Rocklynne, Fred Kummer Jr., A. Hyatt Verrill, among others. And to these writers, plus Don Wilcox, H. G. Wells, William P. McGivern, Robert Moore Williams, Raymond Palmer, David Wright O'Brien, Nelson Bond, Howard Browne, Paul Fairman, and many others, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and the entire field of stf-fantasy owes a debt of gratitude. Each in his own way added to the growth of this little-known segment of writing, so that what was once considered just a crackpot offshoot is today a respected part of literature.

MOST OF these writers are today well-known in other fields of writing

besides stf. Their material has appeared in some of the top magazines in the country, in movie and TV scripts and books. But 14 years ago, many of them and FA were both young career-wise, and started together. And each advanced the other.

WITH STORIES like Eando Binder's "The Little People", Nelson Bond's "Son of the Deluge", David Wright O'Brien's "Mr. Higgin's Hat", Bill Hamling's "Shadow of the Sphinx", Don Wilcox' Mogo series and "The Whispering Gorilla", Howard Browne's "Warrior of the Dawn" and "The Man From Yesterday", Paul Fairman's "The Man Who Stopped At Nothing", FANTASTIC ADVENTURES occupies a top position in the field of fantasy.

BUT THINGS change—and now the time has come for FANTASTIC ADVENTURES as we know it to change. On March 10, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES combines with the digest-size FANTASTIC, to include not only the best of FA, but the best of fantasy and science fiction in all of literature. Your welcome to FANTASTIC's advent was an overwhelmingly tremendous ovation, and a challenge to our future editorial plans for our digest-size magazines—both F and AS. But we plan a contents for future issues of both new-format magazines that contains thoughtful, exciting, humorous, provocative, weird and thrilling stories—by brilliant and popular writers—that will keep you as devoted to the new issues as you were to the old.

WITH THIS last editorial, I also leave the Ziff-Davis staff. Personal reasons take me back to Chicago, where I'll join the ranks as a reader of our favorite magazines, and as an occasional contributor as I have been in the past. My best to all the ZD Fiction Group staff with whom I've so much enjoyed working over a period of many years: to Ray Palmer, Howard Browne, Bill Hamling, Paul Fairman, Henry Bott, Malcolm Smith, Leo Summers, Ed Valigursky, and all the rest. It's been a wonderful experience—will remain a cherished memory.

.....Lila E. Shaffer

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is published monthly by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company at 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter July 30, 1927, at the Post Office, Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Authorized by Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada as second-class matter. Additional second class entry, Holyoke, Mass. Postmaster—please return undelivered copies under form 3679 to 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill. SUBSCRIPTION RATES: U.S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U.S. Possessions, \$2.50 for twelve issues; in British Empire \$2.50; all other foreign countries \$3.50 for twelve issues.



Picture yourself going places

You've done it often. Call it day-dreaming or you live, but you've seen yourself in a bigger job—giving orders and making decisions—driving off in a smart new car—buying your family a fine home.

There's nothing wrong with dreams. But how about making them come true? You can do it, if you're willing to try!

Look around you. The men who are going places are the trained men. They've learned

special skills that bring them better jobs and higher pay. It's the men without training whose dreams never come true.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and wish? If you really want to succeed, you can get the training you need by studying at home in your spare time. International Correspondence Schools offer you a course in just about any field you choose, giving you the practical plus the bedrock facts and theory. No skimming or skimping! And you'll be earning while you learn. Students report better jobs and more pay within a few months.

Look over the list of subjects in the coupon below. Pick out the one that interests you most—the one that holds the greatest future for you. Then mark the coupon, and mail it today. Find out what I. C. S. can do for you. It costs only a stamp or postcard, but it's the first step if you want to go places!



SMARTEST THING HE EVER DID

I will tell of the trained men who hold the better jobs. That's when I decided to take an I. C. S. course. Enrolling with I. C. S. was one of the smartest things I ever did. The good son as Plant T. never I hold. I was largely due to the "know-how" I received from my I. C. S. letter. I. C. S. can help any man who is ready."

L. P. S., Detroit, Ind.

FREE BOOK

"How to Succeed." 36 pages packed with worthwhile success tips. Step-by-step plan of action. Pocket size edition. Absolutely free. Send coupon below.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS



BOX 6203-G, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW TO SUCCEED" and the booklet about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

- ART**
- ☐ Commercial Art
 - ☐ Magazine and Book Illustrating
 - ☐ Cartooning
 - ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
 - ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- AUTOMOTIVE**
- ☐ Automobile Mechanics
 - ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
 - ☐ Auto Body Repairing and Refinishing
 - ☐ Diesel—Gas Engines
- AVIATION**
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
 - ☐ Aircraft Engine Mechanic
 - ☐ Airplane Drafting
- BUILDING**
- ☐ Architecture
 - ☐ Arch. Drafting
 - ☐ Building Contractor
 - ☐ Estimating
 - ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
 - ☐ Carpenter Foreman
 - ☐ Reading Blueprints
 - ☐ House Planning
 - ☐ Plumbing

- BUSINESS**
- ☐ Heating
 - ☐ Steam Fitting
 - ☐ Air Conditioning
 - ☐ Electrician
 - ☐ Business Administration
 - ☐ Certified Public Accountant
 - ☐ Accounting
 - ☐ Bookkeeping
 - ☐ Stenography and Typing
 - ☐ Secretarial
 - ☐ Federal Tax
 - ☐ Business Correspondence
 - ☐ Personnel and Labor Relations
 - ☐ Advertising
 - ☐ Retail Business Management
 - ☐ Managing Small Business
 - ☐ Salesmanship
 - ☐ Traffic Management
- CHEMISTRY**
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
 - ☐ Chemistry
 - ☐ Analytical Chemistry
 - ☐ Petroleum—Ref. Gas
 - ☐ Poly. and Paper Making
 - ☐ Plastics

- CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING**
- ☐ Civil Engineering
 - ☐ Structural Engineering
 - ☐ Surveying and Mapping
 - ☐ Structural Drafting
 - ☐ Highway Engineering
 - ☐ Industrial Engineering
 - ☐ Concrete Construction
 - ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- DRAFTING**
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
 - ☐ Architectural Drafting
 - ☐ Electrical Drafting
 - ☐ Mechanical Drafting
 - ☐ Structural Drafting
 - ☐ Sheet Metal Drafting
 - ☐ Mine Surveying and Drafting
- ELECTRICAL**
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
 - ☐ Electrician
 - ☐ Electrical Maintenance
 - ☐ Electrical Drafting
 - ☐ Electric Power and Light
 - ☐ Livestock
- HIGH SCHOOL**
- ☐ High School Subjects

- ☐ College Preparation
 - ☐ Mathematics
 - ☐ Commercial
 - ☐ Good English
- MECHANICAL AND SHOP**
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
 - ☐ Industrial Engineering
 - ☐ Industrial Supervision
 - ☐ Foremanship
 - ☐ Mechanical Drafting
 - ☐ Machine Design Drafting
 - ☐ Machine Shop Practice
 - ☐ Tool Design
 - ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
 - ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
 - ☐ Reading Blueprints
 - ☐ Toolmaking
 - ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
 - ☐ Heat Treatment—Metallurgy
 - ☐ Sheet Metal Work
 - ☐ Sheet Metal Pattern Drafting
 - ☐ Refrigeration
- POWER**
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
 - ☐ Diesel—Electric
 - ☐ Electric Light and Power

- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering
 - ☐ Stationary Fireman
- RADIO, TELEVISION, COMMUNICATIONS**
- ☐ General Radio
 - ☐ Radio Operation
 - ☐ Radio Servicing—FM
 - ☐ Television
 - ☐ Electronics
 - ☐ Telephone Work
- RAILROAD**
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
 - ☐ Diesel Locomotive
 - ☐ Air Brakes
 - ☐ Car Inspector
 - ☐ Railroad Administration
- TEXTILE**
- ☐ Textile Engineering
 - ☐ Cotton Manufacture
 - ☐ Rayon Manufacture
 - ☐ Woolen Manufacture
 - ☐ Loom Filing
 - ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
 - ☐ Textile Designing
- HOME ARTS**
- ☐ Dressmaking and Designing
 - ☐ Cookery
 - ☐ Tea Room Management

Name _____ Age _____ Home Address _____

City _____ State _____ Working Hours _____ A.M. to _____ P.M.

Occupation _____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada

fantastic ADVENTURES

MARCH, 1953

Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

All Features Complete

WILLIAM B. ZIFF

Chairman of the Board
and Publisher

B. G. DAVIS

President

VICE-PRESIDENTS

H. J. MORGANROTH

Production Director

LYNN PHILLIPS, JR.

Advertising Director

H. G. STRONG

Circulation Director

LOUIS ZARA

Associate Editorial Director

Secretary-Treasurer

G. E. CARNEY

Color Art Editor

HERMAN R. BOLLIN

Editor

HOWARD BROWNE

Managing Editor

L. E. SHAFFER

Associate Editor

PAUL W. FAIRMOR

Art Editor

LEO RAMON SUMMERS

EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

By The Editor 4

THE MADMAN

By Charles Recour 8

WHEN THE EARTH WAS YOUNG

By Omar Booth 59

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

By Sam Dewey 61

DEATH ON THE BETELGUESE

By Dee Arlen 89

LAND OF THE MATRIARCHS

By E. Bruce Yaches 101

EDITORIAL AND EXECUTIVE OFFICES, 366 MADISON AVE.,
NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All communications concerning subscriptions should be addressed to Circulation Dept., 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address.

Copyright 1953 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. All rights reserved.



All Stories Complete

- GAMBIT ON GANYMEDE** (Short Novel—17,000) by Alexander Blada 10
Illustrated by Dick Francis

Tyranny flourished on Ganymade. A strong hand was needed to win freedom. The only strong hand available belonged to a pirate steeped in villainy

- THE BEAST** (Novelette—15,000) by Ivar Jorgensen 40
Illustrated by Dick Francis

When a man seeks victory without honor—when he drives toward success by methods of torture that animals would scorn, he himself is a beast

- WOMAN'S WORLD** (Novelette—15,000) by Tad Taina 62
Illustrated by Frank Noverro

Do you believe that women are the weaker sex? Do you feel that men are masters of the universe. Maybe, but what if women are tall as trees?

- CETI WAS A WHALE** (Short—4,000) by Noel Loomis 90
Illustrated by Dick Francis

In all creation there had to be one eternal entity to carry the torch of knowledge to the unborn. Ceti was such as this. But Ceti was tired

- BOY MEETS TREE** (Short—5,000) by Tedd Thomey 102
Illustrated by Dotzenko

It was extremely frustrating. Charlie went head over heels for this gorgeous dame. But when he got serious she turned into a green tree

- PROJECTION FROM EPSILON** (Short—7,500) by Gordon MacCreagh 112
Illustrated by George Olesan

No more deadly invaders ever threatened the security of earth. They had skill and superior intelligence. But earth had Dr. Ken Weiler.

Cover painting by Frank Noverro

CONTRIBUTIONS: Contributors are advised to retain a copy of their manuscripts and illustrations. Contributions should be mailed to the New York Editorial Office and must be accompanied by return postage. Contributions will be handled with reasonable care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. Any copy accepted is subject to whatever adaptations and revisions are necessary to meet the requirements of this publication. Payment covers all author's, contributor's and contentant's rights, title, and interest in and to the material accepted and will be made at our current rates upon acceptance. All photos and drawings will be considered as part of the material purchased.

THE MADMAN

By Charles Recour

IT ALL STARTED when Bureau handed me a ticket and told me to get going to Los Alamos. I grabbed the first plane out of Washington to Chicago, mildly surprised and interested in what I was going to do but in complete darkness as to what the trip was all about.

The fantastic coincidence occurred simply because I had a two-hour lay-over in Chicago.

I dropped into one of the innumerable bars which line the highway bordering the eastern edge of the Chicago airport. It was dim-lit, almost empty at this hour and it looked exceedingly inviting.

The bartender hastily whipped up my Planter's Punch—I'm fond of rum—and left me alone. Sitting on a bar stool a few feet away was a powerfully built middle-aged man. He glanced at me as I sipped my drink, and then smiled.

I'm friendly so I smiled back. "Nippy out, isn't it?" I said as a starter.

"Yes, it is," he answered agreeably. "It's a night when even Hell wouldn't be too warm."

"Not exactly," I grinned. "Hell is a little too hot for my taste."

"I was quite serious," he said soberly. "The world is so full of evil. It's dreadful, don't you think so?"

"Oh it's not so bad," I said.

"Yes, it is," he answered abruptly. "It's very bad, very bad indeed. That's why I can't make up my mind whether I want to destroy Chicago or Denver. Both of those places are ridden with the worst in evil."

"Well," I said, trying not to smile, "don't destroy Chicago while I'm in it."

"Oh," he said perfectly intently, "I wouldn't do it now. I'd wait a while and at least try to throw some fear into the people."

And that was the extent of my conversation with what the newspapers later called the "Madman."

If I had known what was going to happen, I would have called out the police or shot the man on the spot. But I didn't. He was simply a middle-aged harmless, obsessed person, suffering from something. I didn't even give him a second thought on the plane to Los Alamos.

At the atomic research center, I learned quickly.

"Burroughs," the Chief said, a special military craft had gotten him out before me. "Get a load of this—and don't laugh."

He handed me a plain sheet of paper on which was typewritten a brief note. It went: "I shall remove some of the evil of this world as I would remove a cancer."

The signature was illegible.

"Thompson," the Chief said, "wrote that."

I did a double-take. "You mean Lewis Thompson?"

He nodded. Then I knew. Lewis Thompson was one of the world's foremost atomic scientists.

"But that isn't all," the Chief went on, "thirty pounds of 'stuff' is missing, enough to blow a city sky-high."

"Wait a minute," I said, and then I told the Chief and the rest of them about my brief Chicago experience. Well, of course it turned out from my description that it was Thompson I'd been talking with in that bar.

Security moved fast after that one. But of course it missed the man, Chicago was ransacked for him, quietly and secretly without success.

The rest is history of course, after my accidental miffing of my great chance. When I told them of the man's commentary, casual though it was, on either Chicago or Denver, evacuation plans were instituted, since the sheer irrationality of the scientist was likely to make him adhere to his plan.

And so it was. The Bureau moved fast, but almost not fast enough. Denver was cleared and emptied and so was Chicago, projects of inconceivable difficulty, that testified to by the fact that they were never really emptied completely and the casualty list for Denver, where the Madman finally blew his 'stuff' reached more than thirteen thousand people.

That happened the next day. One of the Denver newspapers got a phone call. The Madman said he was going to destroy the city. Since the papers had been alerted already, they tried to track him down, but without success and within the hour, as we now all know, the northern half of the City of Denver was reduced to radioactive rubble!

The absurd coincidence of my meeting with the Madman defies all the laws of probability, but it happened. Every time I go near Denver automatically my mind switches back to a chilly night in Chicago and I find it difficult to realize that I stood three feet away from a lunatic who even then was planning to kill tens of thousands of people and devastate a city because of his warped convictions that the world was evil-ridden.

I'm still with Security, but sometimes I feel as if I'd be better off at a desk. And I rarely go into bars—though when I do, my gregariousness vanishes under a shell of introspection. Half of Denver is gone, I think, half of Denver...



ONLY
\$1.98

LEARN
THE TRUE
NATURE
OF MAN
AND
WOMAN!

Is man naturally immoral? How frequent are affairs outside of marriage? What is the first cause of disaffection between husband and wife? What is average capacity during the prime of life? The middle years? old age? These and other topics were investigated by Kinsey with 12,000 actual interviews from which no phase of human experience was omitted. Get the full facts and figures in a new book explaining the Kinsey Report—FROM FREUD TO KINSEY—now selling for only \$1.98

NEW FACTS ABOUT YOURSELF

Things previously not talked about now appear widespread and common. For people who are tortured with shame, startling new information is available. Many divorces may be averted and broken families saved with this new knowledge. This amazing book also presents other vital 20th century sex studies. Works of Freud, Ellis, Stoppa, Sanger and others are explained in simple non-technical language.

ENJOY *Rollicking*
BEDSIDE FUN

WITH



ONLY
98¢

Here's lusty entertainment for open minds and ticklish spines. Collected, selected from the best there is, this zestful Primer is an eye-opener for the inexperienced; wisdom for designing; merriment for all. Call it a gay evening's entertainment or an ideal bedside companion, you'll dally over its contents time and time again.

WRITE *Thrilling*
LOVE LETTERS



How to "Break the Ice"
How to Make Everyday Events
Sound Interesting
How to Make Your Sweetheart
Write More Often
How to Express Your Love
How to Make (or Break) a Date
How to Acknowledge a Gift
How to "Make Up"
How to Say "Those Little Things"
How to Make Him (or Her) Miss You



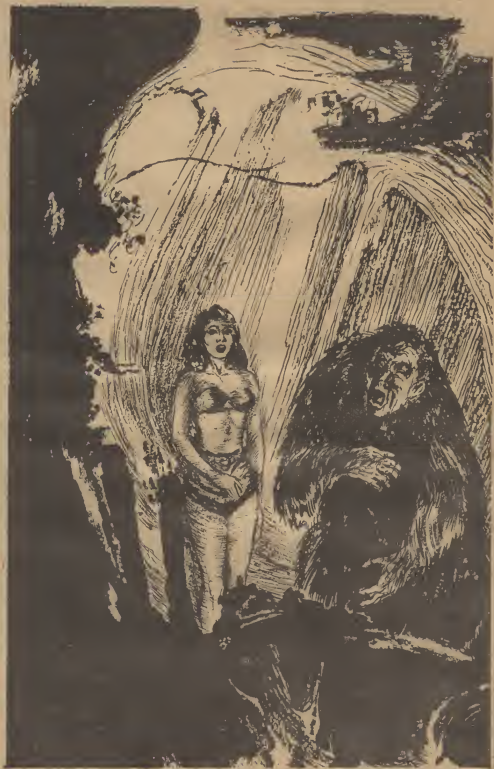
**Married
or
Single,
You'll
Want
MARRIAGE
MISCHIEF**

SINGLE OR MARRIED, you'll go for this saucy "undress" view of bride and groom. **MARRIAGE MISCHIEF** is brand new, devilishly indiscreet, with original full-page cartoons. Featuring: What Every Bride Should Know... Counsel for the Bewildered Groom... The Wedding Daze... The Bachelor Dinner... Hazards of the First Night... Honeymoons, Conventional and Otherwise... From Smoker to Bedroom... The Truth About Trousseau... And many more provoking topics to keep you gagging. An ideal wedding or anniversary gift.

TRY ANY BOOK 10 DAYS! MONEY BACK GUARANTEED! SEND CASH WITH ORDER AND SAVE 48¢ IN POSTAGE AND CHARGES. WE PAY POSTAGE ON ALL PREPAID ORDERS. HOWEVER, WE SHIP C.O.D. IF YOU PREFER. ACT NOW! SATISFACTION GUARANTEED!

PLAZA BOOK CO., Dept. X3, 109 Broad St., N. Y. 4, N. Y.

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I enclose | <input type="checkbox"/> Send C.O.D. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> From Freud to Kinsey | at \$1.98 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Pleasure Primer | at .98 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> How to Write Love Letters | at .98 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Marriage Mischiefs | at .98 |



The ~~man~~-beast howled in agony

GAMBIT ON GANYMEDE

By

Alexander Blade

The pirate Bronson came at last to the end of his string on far-off Ganymede. Then the luck of the damned came again to his aid. He could be a devil or a god

THE SHARP SNAP of a breaking twig lanced suddenly into the deep quiet of the Ganymedian forest. Gil Bronson's head jerked up abruptly, and his body tensed in its seat upon the fallen tree. With his one good hand, he reached slowly for the blast-gun which he wore thrust into his belt, while his blood-shot eyes darted nervously about the surrounding vegetation.

In the shadows at the end of a little glade, perhaps fifty yards distant, something moved that was darker than the undergrowth. Reacting automatically, Gil Bronson whipped out his weapon and fired.

The blast sent a small tree toppling; there was muffled cry of "Frenth, frenth!" Gil Bronson had a momen-

tary sight of a brown, bear-like shape; and then, amid a terrified crackling of branches and a wild waving of vegetation, the thing was gone.

Bronson forced himself to his feet and stood peering intently about him, the blast-gun gripped tightly in his hand. But the sounds of escape quickly died away, the disturbed foliage at the end of the glade quieted, and presently all was still again.

For a moment Bronson considered his miss ruefully. He had been known as a dead shot among men whose existence depended upon a quick draw and an accurate aim. But he had never trained himself to shoot with his left hand, and, with his right arm broken, he realized more than ever now how completely he was at the mercy of

whatever dangers this alien forest might contain.

Bronson shook his head against a sudden, overpowering wave of dizziness. But a black film thickened stubbornly before his eyes; he reeled and would have fallen, but he stumbled against the tree and sat down with abrupt force. The jar started his broken arm to throbbing painfully. And, as though this were a signal, a dozen other aches made themselves known in their varied agonies.

Bronson closed his eyes tightly against his suffering, biting his lips in a desperate effort to retain consciousness. His exertion of will apparently found some hitherto unplumbed depth in his reservoir of energy, for presently he felt better. The pain dimmed and dulled. His mind turned once more to his plight, and his thoughts became bitter ones.

HE REALIZED, now, that he had been the victim of a cunningly prepared trap. That clumsy, apparently helpless freighter, had been nothing more or less than a disguised Interplanetary Ranger battleship. And he, Gil Bronson, the cool, wily pirate who had roamed the spaceways unscathed for more than a half dozen years had been taken in as though he were the veriest tyro.

He knew that the underlying reason for his fall had been a lack of caution on his own part. Piracy had never been a business with him, nor had it been a pleasure. It had been forced upon him by the dictates of utter necessity. It had merely been a means in a bitter fight for survival, and that was perhaps why he had lasted as long as he did. He had seen them come and go, swaggering, boastful buccaneers, while he had gone on and on, untouched by acclaim, unaffected even by the fact that his name had become

something of a legend among lawful and lawless alike. But the life of a privateer, even though that of an unusually successful one, had palled on him, to the point where he no longer cared what happened.

He wondered what it was that had prompted him to seek a lifeboat and escape from the withering fire of the disguised freighter. Had it been his old determination never to allow himself to be beaten? Had it been that unsatisfied quest for something which had bothered him for so long? He guessed that it was this latter, though exactly what it was he did not know.

But he did know that it was something which had no connection with his old life of privateering. His encounter with the battleship had taken place almost mid-way between Jupiter and the Asteroid Belt, and, in the lifeboat, he would have had no difficulty at all in finding one of the innumerable pirate hideouts in the Belt. He knew that he would have been welcomed without reserve, given his own choice of any one of a dozen sturdy spacecraft and his own pick of a new crew. But he hadn't chosen to go back. He had, instead, headed the lifeboat toward Jupiter and its moons.

Bronson found himself speculating on just how foolish this act had been. The accident, which had ruined the lifeboat and broken his arm, had left him almost helpless and entirely without aid. Had he taken the other course, it might have been different. But, as it was, he was marooned here on Ganymede. He felt no strong regrets, other than a grave uncertainty as regarded his future. He was an outlaw known to police everywhere, and as such he was subject to arrest instantly upon discovery of his identity. And Ganymede was by now fairly well populated, possessing two large spaceport towns and a scattering of smaller, rural ones.

BRONSON shrugged fatalistically. His choice had been made, and now he'd have to make the best of it. But he knew one thing—they'd never take him alive. He'd never emerge as one of the living dead of a reformation operation.

Bronson settled his crudely-splintered arm across his stomach and closed his eyes. A pleasant lassitude was stealing over him, and for the first time, though dimly now, he became aware of the extent of his exhaustion. He had come a long way through this forest into which his ship had crashed. Suddenly his thoughts snapped off and the warm blankness of sleep purred over him.

When Bronson awoke it was night—or at least as much of night as it ever became on Ganymede. The great, swollen orb of Jupiter no longer filled and lighted the sky. There was only a deep, purple dusk filled with the ever-changing shadows of the dozens of moons which had taken its place.

Bronson felt refreshed and stimulated, though a gnawing ache in his stomach told him of his need for food. He thought momentarily of the creature at which he had fired and wondered if it would have been edible. He shrugged, picked up the blast-gun which had fallen from his sleep-laxened fingers, and pulled himself to his feet.

HIS LEG-MUSCLES ached protestingly. Long years of life on space ships and on the almost gravityless asteroids had made difficult for him the gravity of even as small a world as Ganymede. He tightened his lips and started off in a continuation of the route over which he had already come.

Faint sounds and rustles reached his ears as he plodded along. The forest was filled with a myriad of small,

stealthy life, though he saw no creatures. There were only the multiple shadows that formed and flowed inkily into other forms. Great fern trees towered about him, like monster hydras in the dusk. And there were large flowers, almost as tall as himself, that nodded like wise, knowing heads in the faint, night breeze.

Several times Bronson stumbled, and once, gripped momentarily in the tentacular branches of a snake-bush, he was thrown headlong. Only at the last minute was he able to twist himself to the left and avert a fall upon his broken arm. As it was, however, the shock of the fall woke the injured member into throbbing agony.

And, as if this weren't enough, thirst now added itself to Bronson's troubles. It thickened his tongue and tickled his throat. He found himself listening desperately for the trickle of water.

The sky began to lighten as the huge rim of Jupiter lifted above the horizon. One by one the night shadows paled and faded away. Bronson looked about him with dull awareness of the dawn. He had lost all sense of the passing of time, though the dragging weight of his legs told him he had walked a long distance.

Bronson's thirst gave way to sudden fever. Several times he had to shake his head against a sick dizziness that made the forest pattern whirl into a mad jumble of color. But his illness crept up on him slowly and inexorably, and before long he was staggering in delirium. It was in this state that he at last emerged from the forest. Ahead of him was a steep slope, and, spreading out from the bottom of this, incredibly enough, was a gently waving sea of bright yellow.

MOUTH AGAPE, eyes shining feverishly, Bronson stumbled to the edge of the slope. "Gold!" he

whispered hoarsely. "Gold! A whole field of gold."

And then he noticed the two dark blots that marred the otherwise smooth expanse. He blinked at them, and slowly they resolved themselves into the figures of human beings. They seemed to be doing something there among the broad wealth of yellow.

"Get out!" Bronson screamed thinly. "It's mine, do you hear? Mine!" He stepped forward, waving his arms wildly. He went over the edge of the slope, but it seemed to him that the world had dropped suddenly from under his feet. The blue of the sky and the yellow of the field mingled wildly; he felt an abrupt burst of terrible agony. And then he was enveloped in an ebon blanket that blotted out everything.

Bronson came to with the sound of a voice in his ears. He forced his eyes open. For a moment he couldn't see clearly. Then vision clarified, and he became aware of a face bending over him and of something being held to his lips.

"Here, drink this," the voice said softly.

Bronson gulped mechanically at first, and then eagerly as liquid touched his throat. It was something cool and sweet, that had a deliciously sour tang to it. He felt immensely better at once.

With stimulation came a sudden surge of curiosity as to the owner of the voice. Bronson lifted his head and found himself staring into the face of a woman. An instant later he revised his first flash of discovery. It was a girl.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Much better, thanks," Bronson responded. He felt an abrupt rise of suspicion. Where was he? Who was this girl? Who were her people?

A little rush of panic went through him as he thought of the unguessable

dangers to which he might have been exposed. He felt for his blast-gun, and then a sudden twinge of pain reminded him of his broken arm. The tactile information of his left hand, however, told him that he lay between the covers of a bed.

Realization of his helplessness swept Bronson like a numbing frame. He was sick, weak, unarmed. There was no way in which he could defend himself against capture. Then he shrugged in a sudden return of his old fatalism. He would have to accept the situation as it was—for the time being, at least.

The girl bent toward him again, and he felt the disturbed covers being settled about him. He thought there was something deft, sure, unafraid, about her quick movements.

THE GIRL straightened and smiled down at him. Of a sudden Bronson was aware of pale gold hair, warm brown eyes, and a short, straight nose that was dusted with freckles. He felt no emotional reaction in the knowledge that she was pretty. His uncertainty and suspicion were things that nothing could quiet.

"Where am I?" he wanted to know.

"In our cabin," she answered. "That is," she added quickly, "mine and my father's. My name is Helen Strand. You can call Pop 'Hank' when you meet him. Everyone does."

Bronson nodded. "My name's—" He hesitated. Then: "My name's Gil Brown." He had thought of something else in the way of an alias, but abrupt memory had come of the initials on his belt buckle and tunic. She must have seen them by now.

Helen Strand smiled again. "Of course," she said.

Bronson wondered dimly at her words, but another thought crowded this aside. "How did I get here?"

"Pop and I heard you call out from where you stood at the top of the slope. Then we saw you fall. You were unconscious when we reached you, and between the two of us, we managed to drag you here to the cabin. Pop isn't very strong, and—and I guess I'm not either." She paused and then added, apparently irrelevantly, "Pop had to set your arm again. The splints you had on all came off when you fell."

"I see."

"You were unconscious for two days, Gany time," the girl went on. "You had a touch of spore-fever, too, but I made you drink *thal* berry juice, and that broke it up."

Bronson nodded, watching her. She seemed affable enough, and from what she told him, was alone except for her father. There was nothing immediately to worry about.

He asked, "What do you do here? I mean, what sort of work do you do?"

A shadow seemed to cross her bright face. "Oh, we're quili-pod farmers. Same as most everyone here on Gany." She seemed reluctant to discuss the matter further, but Bronson relaxed, his doubts satisfied.

Helen Strand drew herself up. "Well, I've got work to do. Try to rest for a while." She turned, then, and became busy in another part of the cabin.

Bronson turned his head about slowly, covertly taking in his surroundings. The cabin was a small one, consisting of a single room, and it was very plainly and simply furnished. From where he lay he could see two arm chairs facing each other before a combination atomoradiator and fireplace. There were lamps on small tables beside the chairs, and on each side of the heating system were bookcases sparsely filled. Beyond the chairs was a corner table, with swing-under seats. Windows were set in the

angle in which the table was situated, and through these Bronson could see a darkening sky. He thought, with a sudden, surprising upsurge of artistic appreciation, that the location of the table was ideal.

DIAGONALLY across the room was a compact nest of shelves and cabinets. Below these, set together as a continuous unit, was a long, white base, which Bronson resolved into its separate components of refrigerator, sink, stove, and work table. There was another window here on the kitchen side of the room, and on the sill of this there stood a dozen or so vases which contained a variety of flowering plants. Helen Strand was at work beside the stove, stirring a pot in which something had begun to hiss and bubble.

Bronson wondered vaguely at the apparent lack of beds. He twisted his head, and the problem was solved, though with it there came a feeling of discomfort. His bed lay against the further wall, and directly above it was another, folded up flush. There was another window here, too, high and long, its screens closed. There were two doors to the room. One Bronson could see over the foot of his bed. The other was directly across the room, between kitchen side and living space.

Bronson felt troubled with the realization of what an inconvenience he must be to these people. They had scarcely enough room for themselves. And the evidences of their poverty were very plain to see. Bronson could remember pirate hideouts in the Asteroid Belt that were vastly much more luxurious than this room.

Dusk thickened slowly in the room, while Helen Strand's slender form moved, wraith-like, from stove to table, stirring her pots, setting out plates and cup. Bronson turned his

head to the angled window to see the sky once again a deep purple. And even as he watched, the glowing globe of a small moon crept out from one corner and began to mount to the other.

There was a sudden click, and Bronson half rose from the bed, startled, as light from a fluoro-tube in the ceiling abruptly flooded the room. Helen Strand smiled reassuringly at him. "Dark, wasn't it?" she said.

Bronson nodded gravely and relaxed again. He found himself watching her from beneath half-closed lids. He wondered how old she was. Not more than nineteen, obviously. He thought that, in other circumstances and in better clothes, she would have been quite pretty. The light of the fluoro-tube showed hands that were red and rough from toil. The lines of her body were thin and boyishly angular in brown plastolex trousers, tucked into heavy boots, and a short-sleeved, blue, synthe-wool shirt, open at the throat. Her pale gold hair, he noticed now, was drawn smooth along the sides of her head and tied into a thick knot at the nape of her neck. Its obviously long length seemed to be her only concession to femininity.

BRONSON tensed at the sound of approaching footsteps from outside. Something rattled against the wall of the cabin.

"That's Pop," Helen Strand said from where she stood at the table, ladling out something into bowls. "He's going to be sick again, if he keeps working so long."

The further door opened and a man entered the room. Helen Strand linked arms with him and drew him over to the side of Bronson's bed.

"This is Pop," she introduced. "Pop, this is Gil Brown."

"Eh?" Hank Strand seemed vaguely puzzled at first. Then his wrinkled,

white-whiskered face broke into a sudden smile. "Oh, sure. Glad to know you, Gil." He extended a gnarled, mahogany-colored hand.

Bronson nodded, drew his left from beneath the covers, and shook it briefly. He looked at the other with sharp, weighing eyes. Hank Strand was thin and gaunt, and but little taller than his daughter. His body was bent from long years of toil, and his brown plastolex work clothes were faded and patched. His brown eyes were blurred and filmed with age, but something fine and brave seemed to emanate from his senility, like a hope which no amount of adversity could ever extinguish.

Helen Strand moved back to the table, and old Hank, alone, shifted uncomfortably beneath the probe of Bronson's eyes. "Glad to see you awake," he said, as if to break the brittle silence.

Bronson drew his lips into the semblance of a grin. There was no danger from this old man, he knew. And it was best that he establish at least half-way friendly relations.

"Your daughter told me I was out for two days."

"You were mighty sick. Feel better, now?"

"Much better, thanks."

Old Hank Strand seemed both pleased and relieved at Bronson's sudden show of friendly volubility. "That fall you had down the slope didn't do your arm any good," he observed. "Had to set the splints again. Second one you had?"

"No—not exactly. I was out prospecting for vulcanium in a rocket flitter, you see. Fuel was low, and I clean forgot about it while searching for ore outcroppings. All of a sudden it gave out completely, and you know what happens when you lose power in an atmosphere as thin as this. First thing I knew, I was wrecked. Lucky I stum-

bled across your farm, or I don't know what would've become of me."

"Sure, sure," Hank Strand acquiesced. He glanced suddenly at the table. "Well, got to get washed up." He nodded at Bronson, and entered the door which the latter had glimpsed previously over the foot of his bed. A light switch clicked, and shortly after came the sound of running water. This, Bronson now knew, was the bathroom.

IN A FEW minutes old Hank emerged and seated himself at the table. Helen Strand came over to Bronson with a bowl in her hands. She sat down at the edge of the bed, and he drew away in sudden unease at her nearness.

"Don't you want me to help you?"

"No, thanks," he answered quickly. "I'll manage myself. Just set the bowl down where I can reach it with my left hand."

She went back to the table, and Bronson plied his spoon awkwardly. The stuff in the bowl he found to be a thick soup, with bits of meat and pieces of broken bread. It was simple enough, but he found it delicious. There was only one other that he could recall who could make a tasty meal out of equally simple ingredients, and that was a Martian cook named Oong, who had fled to the Asteroids as a result of his participation in the Redlands Rebellion. He wondered, irrelevantly, what Oong would be cooking now.

Bronson finished his soup, and at the clink of the spoon in the bowl, Helen Strand looked across the room at him. "Care to have some more?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks."

The bowl, when returned, was this time little more than half filled. The girl smiled a small smile of rueful

apology. "I'm sorry, but this is all that's left."

"That's all right," Bronson lifted his spoon again, but a sudden, subdued snatch of conversation at the table halted him.

"The last one!" It was old Hank's voice, in an exclamation of appalled surprise.

"Yes, Pop. It was dying, anyway. You know Callistan chicken-lizards have to have special feed. They just won't eat anything that grows here on Gany, and that last bag of feed you got from town was emptied long ago."

There was a moment of silence. Then the girl's soft tones sounded again, in an obvious attempt to be cheerful.

"Don't worry, Pop. In the morning I'll take the rifle and see if I can shoot something in the forest."

Bronson glanced down at the bowl in dismay, and the last pangs of his hunger vanished beneath a sudden rush of something almost approaching shame. He had known these people were poor, but he realized now that he hadn't even guessed at the full extent of their poverty. Helen Strand had killed their last chicken-lizard to make this soup, and from what he had heard they had little else if nothing more in the way of food.

Momentarily, Bronson thought of refusing the soup, but he realized that this would be a futile if not foolish gesture. He shrugged and lifted the spoon. But somehow all taste and flavor had gone. Later he was offered coffee, but he refused it with a curt shake of his head.

FOR SOME reason which he couldn't quite explain, Bronson felt angry and tense. He lay with his face to the wall, motionless, while the Strands washed the dishes and tidied the room. He was conscious of the creak of the arm chairs, but he did

nothing to break the stiff silence which followed.

Finally Helen Strand rose to her feet. "I'm going to bed, Pop," she said, in a dull, quiet voice. "'Night."

"'Night, honey."

There was the sound of the door opening and closing, and then the creak of the other arm chair as Hank Strand rose also. Bronson's eyes flicked upward as, with a groan of hinges, the other bed above him was lowered. He turned his head to look at Hank Strand.

"Where does she sleep?"

"Eh—you awake? Oh, Helen sleeps in the shed. Fixed up a bed for her there. It's comfy enough."

"I see."

The old man switched off the fluoro-tube in the ceiling, and Bronson heard him undress in the dark. Then there was a brief, shaking sensation as he climbed into the upper bed, and all became still.

Unable to sleep, Bronson lay watching the majestic procession of glowing moons in the patch of purple sky visible beyond the angled windows. He found himself thinking thoughts and feeling emotions which, somehow, seven years of hard, outlaw life had not been able to burn out of him. And he found, too, that the nebulous something after which he had quested for so long was slowly taking shape. He was half eager, half afraid to accept it for what it really was.

Dawn came, sweeping away the ever-changing night shadows. The interior of the cabin lightened slowly. Bronson, whose eyes had not closed during the entire night period, pulled aside his covers gingerly and swung his feet to the floor. With an effort, he pulled himself erect. He experienced a moment of sick giddiness, but determination kept him upright. Shortly, he felt better, and ventured several uncertain steps.

He looked about the room questioningly. The first thing to do was to find his clothes. A large, plasti-board wardrobe directly behind the head of his bed seemed the most obvious place, and here he presently found them. His space-boots, trunks, and heavy, long-sleeved tunic had all been cleaned and neatly patched. His under-garments had not been removed, and without further loss of time, he dressed himself, careful of his splint-enclosed, bandage-wrapped arm. His blast-gun hung on a convenient hook, and this he buckled clumsily around his waist.

With a towel from the bathroom, he made a sling for his arm. Then, pulling the hood of his tunic up around his head, he stepped out into the Ganymedian morning. The forest swallowed him.

THREE HOURS later, just as Helen Strand was preparing to enter the cabin to make breakfast, Bronson reappeared. His sling was loaded with berries and bread-mushrooms. Gripped in his left hand was a vine-wrapped bundle containing several feathered frog-birds and tree-rabbits, all slightly cooked by the blast-gun, yet almost wholly edible.

The girl whirled at the unexpected sound of his approach. Her eyes widened. "Why, Mr. Brown!" she gasped. "Where have you been?" And then she noticed his bundle. "Oh—you shouldn't have!"

"It's all right." Bronson swung his vine-wrapped catch to the ground. He swayed, braced himself by placing his left hand against the wall of the cabin. His thin, hard face was white beneath its tan, and the scar that ran along the left side of his jaw stood out starkly. His eyes were large and shadow-rimmed.

"You're sick!" Helen Strand accused. "You shouldn't have gone out."

"I'll be all right in a while." Bron-

son removed his loaded sling, dropped it to the ground. He swayed again, caught himself.

The girl reached out to support him, her small face pale and anxious. "You've got to go back to bed!"

"No. Just let me sit down for a while."

"Inside, then."

Bronson allowed himself to be led into the cabin. He dropped into one of the arm chairs, and exhaustion swept over him in a long-suppressed tide. He closed his eyes, while his temples pounded and his arm throbbed.

Hank Strand looked over the side of his bed. "Eh? What's up?" he wanted to know.

The girl explained briefly, then went outside. Old Hank swung skinny, veined legs over the side of the bed and hopped to the floor. He struggled into his clothes amid scattered bursts of speech.

"Shouldn't have—done that. Could see—you were mighty sick. Kill yourself—before—you know it."

"I'll be all right," Bronson said again, impatiently.

Helen Strand re-entered with the sling and the bundle and began to cook breakfast. She outdid her culinary miracle of the night before.

THE SHORT Ganymedian days and the shadowed dusks that were its nights flashed by into the equivalent of an Earthly month. During that time, Bronson learned the simple tasks of the farm, and spent most of his time out in the quili-pod field with old Hank. He alternated between the farm and hunting, with which latter he kept the Strands abundantly supplied with meats and fruit. His arm healed rapidly, and it wasn't long before the splints and bandages had been removed.

Little trace of his former appearance remained. His space-tan had giv-

en way to a reddish mahogany hue almost as deep as old Hank's. His black hair, worn long before, as was the style, had lengthened to the point where it became a nuisance, and now he wore it cut short. He had replaced his space garments with an extra set of old Hank's plastolex work clothes, and in these, with arms and legs protruding, he looked like any other quili-pod farmer of impoverished circumstances. Only the hard flash of his blue eyes remained to tell of the stern, indomitable spirit that was still Gil Bronson.

Of all the tasks which fell to him at the farm, that of caring for the quili-pods interested him the most. He was continually surprised at the fact that so simple a plant demanded such a large amount of attention. Unnecessary leaves had to be pruned so that the pods would grow big and fat. The earth at the base of the thick stalks, constantly pushed aside by swaying in the breeze, had to be tamped down so that parasitic spores wouldn't settle among the roots and cause decay. The plants themselves had to be sprayed continuously with poison to ward off the hosts of voracious insects which swept in from the forest. And every other day the watering line, which connected with a distant stream, had to be shifted from row to row so that the plants would receive sufficient moisture.

Bronson performed these duties faithfully and with a certain amount of enjoyment. He had a queer respect for the plants, knowing what he did of their purpose and worth, and out of this he felt anxiety for their welfare, because of what they meant to the Strands. The pods, when matured, were picked and then crushed for their oil. And this, when sold to the buyers from the big quili refineries on Earth, brought as high as fifty credits a gallon.

Memories of his former life became dim and unreal. Bronson thought occasionally of his space-roving days and of the wild gaiety of the Asteroids, but with no accompanying pang of nostalgic emotion. These were things which he had never really cared for, other than that they had been the only opportunities open to him at the time. The life of a quili-pod farmer had satisfied that strange seeking within him. His quest had ended, and he was content.

Day and moon-filled night blended into a pleasant, almost lazy kaleidoscope in which, absorbed, Bronson lost all sense of the passing of time. Something of the hardness went out of his face and his eyes. He was no longer surrounded by rivals who would jump him as soon as he showed any signs of weakening. Existence was no longer one of quick wits, a fast draw, and ready cash. Tomorrow, too, was no longer an uncertainty.

Gradually, he ceased thinking of the girl and the old-man impersonally and collectively as "the Strands." They became separate individuals, each real and distinct, to whom he attached a certain amount of affection. In the beginning, he had thought of them only as tools or pawns in his own personal game with Fate. He had intended to live off them, in the comparative safety of their cabin, until he could once again face the world with mind and body sound. But their helplessness and their bravery in the face of adversity had changed these plans. Now they were almost entirely dependent upon him, and he found a strange pleasure in his responsibility for their care.

In the company of Helen Strand he discovered a kind of friendship in which his life had long been lacking. Often the girl went with him on his hunting trips into the forest, and on these times, the routine of hunting,

enjoyable enough in itself, took on something of the nature of a picnic excursion. He found that she was intelligent and quick-witted, humorous as well as brave, and above all, almost as good a shot with her old electro-bolt rifle as he was with his blast-gun.

The cabin became the first real home he had known in long years, and he acknowledged this fact in various ways. He built a fence around it, and with stoges carried laborously from the stream, made a path leading to the door. He started vines growing around the front, and planted several decorative shrubs and trees. In the rear he helped Helen lay out a small garden, which in its lack of Earthly vegetables and plants, was almost useless. It served, however, to keep the girl occupied, for Bronson's coming had freed her from work in the quili-pod field.

"IT WON'T BE long, now," Bronson remarked one night as he, Helen, and old Hank sat together before the fireplace, where an aromatic fern log burned with a cheerful, crackling light. "The quili-pods have started to mature."

Winter was approaching, and the nights had become successively cooler, filled with occasional, fine rains. Ganymede was reaching a point in its orbit where it would swing outward a little over one-hundred miles from the distance it usually occupied about its primary. Not a very great distance, and centrifugal force soon pulls it back to normal, but it brings a short interval of severe cold.

There was no fuel for the atomoradiator, and so Bronson had swung it aside to use the fireplace. He had already begun laying in a supply of wood. He had made an arm chair for himself, too, and Helen had arranged the three so that they formed a small

triangle before the fireplace, with Bronson's at the apex.

Old Hank nodded reflectively into the fire. "No," he echoed, "won't be long, now. The pods are turning blue, and soon as the leaves start to wither up, we can begin picking them. It'll be a good crop." He nodded again. "A good crop."

"I've figured it out," Bronson said. "We should draw about fifty gallons from what we have. Not a bad yield for a farm of this size."

Helen made a sudden, soft exclamation. "Why—why, that's almost twenty-five hundred credits!"

Old Hank chuckled. "Surprised, eh, Honey? Yep, there'll be enough to pay off the mortgage, and then—"

"The mortgage!" Bronson broke in, startled. "You've never told me about that."

"We thought it best not to, Gil," Helen explained. "You were doing so much for us already that we didn't want you to start worrying about that, too."

"I was laid up last year," old Hank added, "and with only Helen to work the farm, the crop was mighty small. Just got enough to pay expenses, and in order to keep going. I had to take out a mortgage on the farm with a banker in town by the name of Heath. He also owns a couple of big plantations on the other side of town, by the way."

Bronson looked puzzled. "Plantations?"

"They're only big quili-pod farms gone fancy," old Hank answered wryly. "Soon as most anybody here on Gany starts earning money, they buy up more land, hire some Venusians to work for them, and then go around calling themselves planters. They've even got a landed aristocracy of sorts started, and they're so snooty they won't even look at you, unless it's about money."

Bronson shrugged. "Well, I'm glad you'll be able to pay off the mortgage. Mind telling me how much it's for?"

"Course not, Gil. One-thousand credits."

"One-thousand credits! Why, that's sheer robbery!" Bronson's blue eyes flashed with cold anger.

"That's the lowest figure I could get from Heath," old Hank said ruefully. "You don't know those snooty planters. Any favors from them has to be paid back through the nose every time."

Helen touched Bronson's arm. "Anyway, Gil, that leaves us fifteen-hundred credits. And that's still a lot of money."

The anger faded from Bronson's face. He asked, "What will you do with it? Buy machinery? Plant more crops?"

"No, Gil, Pop and I are going to Earth." Her brown eye became soft and dreamy, as if she peered into another world of exquisite beauty. "Earth!" she murmured softly.

Bronson stared at her in surprise and dismay. Sudden pain and disappointment swept over him like a blast of chilling cold. In his stay with the Strands, Bronson had gradually formed a picture of his future, one that included Helen and old Hank in every bit of detail. The girl's words had automatically ripped the canvas from its frame, leaving it blank and empty. He stared into the fire, mind and body numb.

"I've never been to Earth," Helen went on. "I'd like so much to see what it's like. It must be a big and wonderful world. Pop came from Earth, though, and it would be nice if he could see it once again, before—before. . . ." Her voice faded out and she stared down at her folded hands, brown eyes suddenly misty and dim.

"**A**W, NOW, HONEY," old Hank said, in something like embarrassment.

"So be it, then!" Bronson said abruptly. He turned to old Hank. "What do you intend to do with the farm, sell it?"

"Why, heck no. Gil! After what you did for us, it's yours—lock, stock, and barrel."

Helen leaned forward. "We know how you love the farm, Gil. And it's the least we can do to show our thanks. Will you stay?"

"Stay?" Bronson considered the question. He knew he really liked the farm. In its multitude of chores he had found enjoyment, satisfaction, and content. Without the Strands, of course, it would be a desolate, empty place, but no other choice was left for him. There was nothing else he could do in the world of ostensibly honest men. He knew nothing of commerce, finance, engineering, or science. And in the bigger world beyond the farm was constant danger of discovery, apprehension, and the reformation operation which would leave him as good as dead. The thought of going back to his former life of piracy was distasteful.

"Yes, Bronson said, finally, "I'll stay."

Helen's small hand gripped his. "I'm happy about that, Gil. I've lived here all my life, you know, and with Mom buried up in the forest, I wouldn't like to think of anyone else owning the place."

There was no further talk that night. Helen and old Hank looked into the fire as if seeing there a brighter, happier future. Bronson looked, too, but his eyes were on the ashes that had begun to sift down through the bottom of the grate.

Morning brought a visitor to the farm. Bronson, helping old Hank assemble the quili-pod press in front of

the shed, looked up with startled abruptness as a rocket flitter made its noisy appearance overhead.

Old Hank squinted up painfully through his fading eyes. "Oh," he said, in final recognition. "It's the Sheriff."

"The Sheriff!" Bronson went rigid, and his hand unconsciously moved to his hip for a blast-gun that wasn't there. His senses focussed themselves with a cold, deadly attention on the circling flitter.

"It's all right, Gil," old Hank reassured. "Sheriff McCullough's an old friend of ours from town. He stops by for a talk once in a while."

Helen appeared in the doorway of the cabin as the flitter swayed down to a landing on its whirling gyro-vanes. Bronson and old Hank joined her just as McCullough climbed from the cockpit.

THE SHERIFF¹ waved a hand in genial greeting. "Howdy, folks!" He was a short, thick-set man, with a broad, copper-hued face. Sharp, grey eyes, twinkling, now, peered out from under his thick, black brows. An old knife scar, partially hidden by a drooping, grizzled mustache, ran from his upper lip to the right nostril of his short, square nose. He was dressed in garments that dated back to old, frontier days, a scratched and battered space-helmet, short jacket, and long, loose trousers stuffed into knee-high boots. In these, with his bright, iridium badge and the heavy automatic slung at his hip, he was the very personification of a small town lawman. He carried a package under his left arm.

McCullough shook hands with old Hank, then put his arm around Helen in a short hug. "Great space, girl, you get prettier every time I see you!" he boomed. And then his gaze settled on Bronson, standing apart from the

others, and his heavy brows drew together questioningly.

"Sheriff, I want you to meet Gil Brown," Helen introduced quickly. "Gil was a prospector until his flitter crashed in an accident near here. His arm was broken, but instead of taking care of him, he took care of us. Gil's been a great help on the farm. I don't know what we'd have done without him."

McCullough nodded. "Glad to hear that. Shake, Gil." He extended a thick, square hand.

Bronson stepped forward, and over the handclasp his watchful, weighing gaze met McCullough's friendly one. His senses were taut with a fear of discovery.

Of a sudden, McCullough's eyes narrowed reflectively. "Say, haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

None of the alarm which coursed an electric thrill along Bronson's nerves showed in his thin face. "Could be," he responded casually. "I've been around a great deal."

McCullough grinned, and his scrutiny slid from Bronson to his surroundings. "Why, what's been happening around here?" he exclaimed in surprise. "The place has become as pretty as a picture." His head swung once more to Bronson. "Your work, Gil?"

"A little," Bronson admitted.

Helen gave a short, soft laugh. "Gil's being modest, Sheriff. He did every bit of this." She linked her left arm through McCullough's right and drew him into the cabin. McCullough chose one of the arm chairs and sat down heavily, placing his package on the floor beside him.

"Nice crop you have out there, Hank," he observed, waving an arm. "Saw it as I was coming in. You'll take in a tidy sum, this time."

Old Hank bobbed his white head.

"Tidy enough, Sheriff. 'It'll pay off the mortgage I have out with Heath, and Helen and I are going to Earth with the rest."

"Going to Earth, eh? Well, I'm sure glad for you folks. Wish I could manage to visit the old world myself sometime. I'll miss you, though."

"We're leaving the farm with Gil," Helen explained. She went on to tell of the work at the farm and of her plans for the future.

McCULLOUGH listened sympathetically, then took up his own end of the conversation. "Not much doing at Lloydtown. The place is almost dead. Isn't like the good old days, when I had my hands full with drunken miners and gun-toting toughs. Lots of piracy still going on out in space, though. And speaking of piracy, have you heard they finally got Gilbert Bronson?" The Sheriff looked at his audience with something of a personal triumph on his broad face.

"Yep," he went on, "an Interplanetary Ranger battleship, disguised as a freighter, took him on about half-way between here and the Asteroids and blew him clean out of space. Oh, they admitted a few life-boats escaped, but nothing's been heard out of Bronson all since that time, and so it's quite certain they got him. One less of those robbing space-scum, I say, though Gilbert Bronson wasn't a bad sort as they go. He was outlawed on account of that old Corporation trouble on Mars. He was one of the leaders in the Uprising, and after he was outlawed, he became a pirate, raiding Corporation ships. Helped a lot of poor people, I've heard—but if you ask me, a pirate's a pirate. I'd make short work of them, given the chance, believe me!"

McCullough glared with bulldog belligerence at his listeners. Helen and

old Hank were very quiet. Their eyes were fixed politely upon the Sheriff, but they mirrored a strange lack of response. Bronson was perched on the dining table, lazily watching a fine rain which was beginning to bead the angled windows.

Though outwardly nonchalant and unconcerned, as befitted his role of an innocent farmhand, Bronson was alert and tense. His keen senses were directed upon McCullough like a cat watching an unsuspecting dog. He had the other's qualities and potentialities well fixed in his mind by now, and these told him that though McCullough was friendly and good-natured, garrulous and slightly boastful, his hatred for crime would, nevertheless, make him a very dangerous antagonist.

Bronson knew, however, that he had passed the acid-test in his introduction to the Sheriff, and he had no immediate worries where his identity was concerned. Not even Helen and old Hank knew who he really was, though their words and actions at times made him suspect that they knew his past life wasn't entirely what he made it out to be. He had felt a desire for confession several times, but a repugnance at actually doing so had kept him still. It would have been inevitable had they remained with him, but since they were going to Earth, it was unnecessary. He didn't want them to carry away unpleasant memories of him.

MCCULLOUGH stirred his bulk in the arm chair in a vague unease at the silence. He cleared his throat.

"Say, heard the planters talking about something funny in town the other day. They've seen rocket-bugs flying around already. At this time of year—imagine!"

"Rocket-bugs?" Bronson questioned

automatically, as he always did when hearing something new to him. He was always interested in anything that related to farming, and was constantly adding to his store of knowledge.

Helen turned in her chair. "They're funny things, Gil, and once you see one, you'll recognize it right away. They're a bright red in color, and they glide along on little, immovable wings. They propel themselves by shooting out their waste matter in the form of a gas through little tubes around their bodies, just like rocket ships. That's how they got their name. They're cute in a way, but they're awful pests."

Old Hank nodded in agreement. "They eat quili-pods, for one thing," he added.

"That's what the planters in town are afraid of," McCullough took up. "They don't seem to know just why the rocket-bugs should be out so early. They usually appear shortly before snow falls, eat themselves crazy, and then lay their eggs. They don't live long, because they burn themselves out through the intense chemical activity necessary to shoot them around. But they're terrors while they're alive and going. I know a couple men who became blinded in one eye by having a rocket-bug run smack into them. And a swarm of the insects can eat a quili-pod field of this size clean in less than an hour."

"Well, I don't think a few rocket-bugs can do any harm," old Hank said, with a shrug of his frail shoulders. His fading brown eyes twinkled humorously. "Most likely they're just scouting around for the others. Heard crops are good this year, and looking for the best. We're getting ready to pick our pods, and we'll be finished before they start swarming dangerous. It's still a good time until snow starts falling."

The talk drifted on into inconsequentialities. McCullough and old

Hank reminisced about the past for a while. Then Helen asked eager questions as to what the women in Daley City and Ganyton, the two large spaceport centers, were wearing. Finally, McCullough pulled himself to his feet.

"Well, I'll have to be running along, now."

"Oh, but can't you stay for lunch?" Helen protested.

The Sheriff shook his head. "I'd sure like to, honey, since you're one of the best cooks on Gany. But there's a rather nasty bit of business I have to look into. Couple of traders come into town the other day, bringing word that some men were out trapping Lispers. Two men, from what the traders found of their tracks."

OLD HANK looked shocked, and Helen cried, "Trapping Lispers!" Her small face twisted into an expression of pained sorrow. "But—but they're almost human."

"I know that, honey, and so it's just plain murder. Just remember things like this when anybody starts shooting off his mouth about what a great and glorious civilization we live in. Lisper fur is almost as pretty as you are, and there are rich women on Earth and Mars who'll wear Lisper fur coats whether they come from intelligent beings or not. They'd even wear human skin if it ever became fashionable. I'm going to do everything I can to turn those two trappers in. Rotten, murdering scum, they must be!"

McCullough looked saddened at having to terminate his visit upon a note of unpleasantness. He shook hands with Bronson and old Hank, gave Helen another short hug, and said, "Don't forget to look me up before you leave for Earth." Then he turned and walked quickly out to his waiting flitter.

"Oh!" Helen said suddenly. "The Sheriff forgot his package."

"I'll take it out to him," Bronson volunteered. He scooped it up, and ran out into the drizzle just as the rocket exhausts of the flitter began to cough. He waved his arm. "Wait a moment!" he called. "You forgot something."

McCullough silenced his motors and leaned over the side of the cockpit. "What's that?"

Bronson repeated, and McCullough shook his head with a grin. "I didn't forget it, Gil. That's for the Strands. Some fancy food stuffs from town. I'm sure they can use it—yourself included, of course."

"I see." Bronson looked at the package in something of surprise and disconcertion. When he raised his glance to McCullough again, his blue eyes were very clear and direct. "Thanks, Sheriff."

"It's a small thing, Gil, and the Strands are swell people. And say, Gil—"

"Yes?"

"Keep an eye open for those two trappers, won't you? They're bad customers, and there's no telling what they might do before I can lay hands on them."

"I'll be watching, Sheriff."

McCullough nodded in approval, waved, and shortly, the flitter, its motors thundering, jerked up into the rain. Bronson walked back to the cabin thoughtfully.

THE DRIZZLE continued for three days. No work was done upon the quili-pods, since the rain temporarily arrested their development, and not all the pods were yet quite mature.

An air of tension and unease developed inside the cabin. Old Hank twisted his thin, veined hands continually,

and he muttered at times into his white beard. He spent most of his time at the angled windows, staring out in a kind of wonder.

"Funny," he muttered, shaking his hoary head. "Darned funny."

Bronson tried to interest Helen in the ancient game of chess, with a crude board and pieces which he had made. She tried earnestly to absorb herself in the game, but fine lines had grown between her straight brows as if from an ever-present worry which made this impossible. Her glance would wander from the board and follow old Hank's, out through the angled windows and upon the rain and the quili-pod field.

The girl and the old man said nothing, but Bronson felt their mutual anxiety nonetheless sensitively. He knew something was drastically, radically wrong with the weather, and he experienced a kind of frustrated irritability in his helplessness to do anything about it. He had a sense of impending disaster.

In the evening of the third day, the occupants of the cabin were startled by the sound of a voice calling from outside. Bronson, remembering the Sheriff's parting warning, leaped to the angled windows. Two men were standing before the cabin, one short and round, the other tall and powerfully built.

Even as Bronson looked, the tall one put his hand to his lips. "Hello!" he shouted. "Anybody in?"

Bronson went swiftly to the wardrobe and took his blast-gun down from its hook. The weapon released the atomic energy of sand or pulverized rock, and Bronson had had no difficulty in keeping himself supplied with this simple ammunition. He buckled it about his hips.

Helen touched his arm, her brown eyes wide. "Gil—what's wrong? Are those the men—"

"Don't worry, Helen," Bronson calmed. "Just you and Hank stay here in the cabin." Bronson opened the door slowly, and just as slowly, eased himself out into the fine rain. He found himself covered immediately by an explosive-pellet rifle in the hands of the shorter of the two men.

BRONSON recognized them at once as men he had seen at various times about the Asteroid hideouts. The short one was Sam Harper, and Bronson dismissed him from his mind as the coward he knew Harper to be. The other, however, was an entirely different proposition. Bronson once had had to use his blast-gun against John Marak, and the hulking desperado's right arm terminated in a stump at the wrist as a memento of the duel. Bronson knew Marak hated him with a burning, feral intensity because of this. Hands hanging easily at his sides, Bronson faced Marak now, and his blue eyes were very level, cold, and deadly.

"Why, holy suns!" Harper ejaculated suddenly. "It's—it's—"

"Shut up, Harper," Bronson snapped, not taking his eyes off Marak. "And put that rifle down, or I'll kill you where you stand."

Harper obeyed mechanically as swift fear replaced the recognition in his pale eyes. He licked thick, loose lips, and his flabby face lost some of its normal ruddy color.

"Heard you were dead, Bronson," Marak said conversationally, though his black eyes were dangerously intent. "What're you doing here?"

"That's none of your business," Bronson retorted. "And don't use that name again." He paused a moment, watchfully, knowing that too much talking might give one of the others a chance to use his weapon. "Now listen, you two, I don't want any trouble with you. I know what you're doing

here on Gany, and that's sufficient excuse to burn you down right now. If you're wise, you'll blast a course away from here—and stay away. I won't use words if I catch either of you around here a second time."

Marak's gaze flamed sullenly, but with a perceptible effort, his dark, beard-stubbed face broke into a conciliatory smile. "Aw, now, Gil, that's hardly the tack to take with old friends like me and Sam. Ain't we been in the same business together? Now, all we want—"

"Get out of here," Bronson said.

Harper touched Marak's sleeve. "Come on, John, let's go," he prompted thinly. "We don't exactly need anything, anyway."

Marak shook off the other's hand. His face was knotted with fury. He snarled, "I'll remember this, Bronson!"

"Remember it, then. But don't forget that I'm going to kill you next time I see you around here."

"Come on, John!" Harper pleaded.

With a last stab of rage from his black eyes, Marak turned to go. And then, with almost uncanny rapidity, he whirled. His left hand flashed down to the gun holstered at his hip.

"Don't!" Bronson, half crouching, had his blast-gun in his hand. His eyes glittered like bits of gale-polished ice from far-off Titan.

"For God's sake, John, are you crazy?" Harper bleated. His loose jowls worked in panic. "Stop it, or you'll get us both killed!"

MARAK SLOWLY relaxed. His gun, half drawn, slid back into its holster. The expression on his face hovered between trapped fear and baffled fury.

"Two months ago I'd have killed you instantly," Bronson said slowly. "I don't know what's holding me back

now. Blast off while you've got the chance, Marak. And remember, I won't hold back a second time."

Marak shrugged, his dark, unshaven face expressionless. "Come on, Sam."

Bronson stood motionless before the cabin as the tall figure and the short one moved away into the drizzle. He waited until the foggy gloom of the forest swallowed them, then he turned and slipped inside.

Helen and old Hank came away from the angled windows through which they had been peering. They looked shaken.

"Gil—that man tried to kill you!" Helen cried.

"It's all right now. They won't be back soon, and with McCullough out searching for them, they'll be scared away from this vicinity."

"What did they want?" old Hank questioned.

"Food, most probably. Forget about them."

It stopped raining that night. The next day dawned cloudy, but dry. The supply of food at the cabin had become exhausted, and Bronson dressed himself preparatory to going on a hunting trip.

"Stay near the cabin," he admonished Helen and old Hank. "Have the rifle handy, and keep your eyes open."

"Eh? You mean you're not taking Helen along as usual?" old Hank asked.

Bronson shook his head. "No. It's best that she stay at the cabin, where you both can keep a watch on things while I'm gone."

"But shucks, Gil," the old man protested, "you threw a scare into those men, and it isn't likely they'll come around the farm again. They ought to be smart enough to know that we'll be watching for them. Take Helen along. She's got just as much guts and

she's just as good a shot as they are any old day."

Bronson looked at the girl hesitantly. He was eager for her company, for he had discovered something fine and true in her companionship which made thought of her coming departure doubly hard. He wanted to have her with him as much as possible before that came. And he knew that she could take care of herself, being not only as good shot, but an expert woodsman as well.

Bronson shrugged. "Well, that's up to you, Helen."

"Go ahead, honey," old Hank prompted. "You won't be seeing Gil much longer, you know."

Helen smiled. "All right, then." She put on her coat and cap, grabbed the electro-bolt rifle, and slipped out the door after Bronson.

The forest was wet and dripping, and its usual bright colors were hidden by a heavy, grey haze. The shadows where the trees and bushes grew close together were no longer shadows, but patches of deep gloom. Outlines and details were vague and obscure in the fog, and the depths beyond were dark and strangely mysterious. Bronson found his mood an echo of the somber dankness of the forest. He tried for a while to achieve the feeling of gaiety and intimacy which he had known on previous hunting trips with Helen. But it had gone to some dark place where the probing fingers of his being could not find it. He had a sense of deep depression, almost of foreboding.

THE GIRL, too, was still. She swung along at his side, her brown eyes pensive upon the little trail which they had beaten together.

It was some hours before they found a spot where game was plentiful. Then further hours were spent in the process of stalking, following,

and stalking again. Finally, they had a sufficient catch of frog-birds and tree-rabbits, and later, stumbling over a patch of bread-mushrooms, they picked these, too.

Bronson wrapped the catch in vines and leaves. He slung this over one shoulder, and they started back. It was almost evening. The masses of dark, grey cloud overhead were becoming indistinct under the spreading pall of night. The gloom of the forest deepened with an effect that was like the last vestige of light leaving an already dead world.

Of a sudden, Helen stopped in her stride. She cocked her head to one side, listening. Bronson halted and watched her, faintly puzzled.

"Gil, did you hear it?"

"Why, no—"

"Listen!"

Bronson had been sunk into depths of brooding thought. But now he concentrated his attention on listening.

"Frenth, frenth!"

He heard it, then, faint and plaintive. Memory flashed back to him of a similar cry he had heard from the creature at which he had fired that day in the forest shortly after his lifeboat had crashed.

Helen turned wide eyes to his. "It's a Lisper, Gil—in trouble!"

"Come on, then," Bronson suggested. "Let's find out what's wrong."

The cry was repeated at intervals, and by this they managed to trace it. Presently they found themselves in a little clearing, and here, in the center, its luminous, amber eyes turned up to them imploringly, lay a Lisper.

"Oh—it's hurt, Gil!" Helen whispered.

Bronson advanced slowly toward the creature. But it lay still, watching him with sad, glowing eyes.

"Frenth," it said, with an effort. "Frenth."

"Friend!" Bronson muttered, in sudden realization. "Certainly, old fellow, and so am I." He bent toward the Lisper, and then he saw that its right foot was caught between the cruel jaws of a steel-spring trap.

"Twap," said the Lisper, gesturing. "Fwee?"

Bronson's mouth worked. "You bet, old fellow. And right away, too." He slid the barrel of his blast-gun between the jaws of the trap and applied leverage. Slowly, he forced it open, and the Lisper withdrew its foot.

It tried to rise, tottered, and fell. Then it lay still, blinking its luminous eyes as if bewildered. The Lisper, Bronson saw, was an old one, for its beautiful, glossy coat was shot with white hairs. It looked like nothing so much as an American black bear of Earth, but its muzzle was shorter and its lower limbs were straighter, adapted for walking upright. And, instead of claws, it had slim black fingers and toes.

"Look, Gil," Helen said.

Bronson took the object which she handed him. It was a cheap necklace, strung with large, colored beads.

It was hanging from a branch right above you," Helen explained. "That was the bait which they used to catch the Lisper. When it saw the beads, it tried to reach them, with the result that it was caught in the trap."

Bronson's eyes kindled with indignant anger. He found himself regretting that he hadn't killed Marak while he had the chance.

HELEN REMOVED her coat and tore a large strip from her shirt. She folded this and bound it about the Lisper's foot, where the jaws of the trap had bitten. The Lisper rose, then, swayed, but held itself erect. It started to limp painfully into the forest. But at the edge of the clearing it

paused; for a moment its intelligent, bear-like features worked.

"Thanks," it said, quite plainly. Then it was gone into the deepening gloom.

"Someone had taught it to talk," Helen commented softly. "Probably a trader, with whom it had made friends. The Lispers are very shy, and they avoid people as a rule. But the few traders who can manage to strike up a friendship find it very profitable, for the Lispers are the only ones who know where to find fungus-pearls."

"Fungus-pearls?" Bronson asked quickly.

"They're jewels of a sort, Gil, about the size of your thumb-nail, and a lovely yellow in color. They're beautiful—and awfully expensive. Sheriff McCullough told me once of a fungus-pearl that brought six-thousand credits on Earth."

"Six-thousand credits!" Bronson whistled in awe.

Helen bent to retrieve her coat, and Bronson helped her back into it. Then he picked up her rifle. She reached for it, and suddenly her eyes lighted mistily.

"Oh, Gil, it's going to be hard to leave you behind!" The words spilled from her lips in an abrupt rush, as though she were unable longer to leave them unsaid. "You've been fine and sweet about everything—the farm, the Lisper just now—" She broke off, tears in her brown eyes glistening faintly in the gathering dusk.

Bronson felt her fingers under his where they clasped about the rifle. It was as if a current flowed from her to him, to galvanize into sudden, leaping life the emotions which he had so long kept in the enforced quiescence of repression. Flame streaked throughout his body. Abruptly, blindly, instinctively, he pulled her into his arms.

"Gil," she murmured. "Dear Gil!"

He held her tightly, his cheek pressed to her pale, gold hair, while his heart beat throbbing music. This moment was as he had somehow always known it would be. It was like something dear and familiar which had long ago been laid away against a time when it would be needed again.

Helen stirred against him, raised a pallid, tear-streaked face. "Kiss me, Gil."

He kissed her. Her lips were cold, like those of one who is dead. He gripped her shoulders.

"Helen—don't go to Earth! Stay here with me."

"I can't, Gil," she answered sadly. "I've got to go—for Pop. He's old, and it would mean so much to him. You understand, don't you?"

HE NODDED slowly. "Yes, Helen." But his voice was dull and bitter.

"I'll come back, Gil. This is home to me."

"Of course," he said. But the millions of miles which lay between the farm and the far-away Earth lay upon him like a tremendous weight, under which no amount of hope could ever surge.

Bronson picked up his bundle, and with Helen trudging silently at his side, continued on once more to the farm. He felt crushed and spiritless. The world, which had lightened a moment to reveal vistas of soul-stirring beauty, was once again gloomy and dank. Rain misted down and the sky was dark. No moons showed behind the clouds.

Finally they emerged upon the slope which led down toward the farm. Of a sudden, Helen clutched Bronson's arm.

"Look, Gil!" she whispered. "The cabin's dark."

It was true. The cabin was a darker mass against the gloom of the unnatural night. No lights showed in its windows. Bronson felt a sudden return of his old sense of foreboding.

"Hank must be sleeping," he decided hopefully.

"No, Gil. He'd wait for us." Helen turned up a face that was pale and drawn in the dusk. "Gil—something's wrong. I know it!" She whirled, scrambled down the slope, and began to run madly toward the cabin.

Dim alarm flashing along his nerves, Bronson followed heavily, his boots sucking in the mud. The cabin lighted up shortly before he reached it. There was a moment of silence. Then there followed that which Bronson was never to forget—Helen's scream of horror was dinning into his ears.

"Gil! Gil—oh, my God!"

The beat of Bronson's heart, the intake of his breath, snapped off as if under the choking pressure of a giant hand. He leaped the remaining distance to the cabin, bounded through the doorway. Helen stood in the center of the room, hands pressed to her cheeks, staring down with shocked, unbelieving eyes at the motionless, sprawled form of old Hank.

The girl turned her bloodless face to Bronson. "Pop's dead" she whispered. Then her eyes closed and she swayed in sudden limpness.

Bronson caught her just as she crumpled. He carried her over to the lower bed and laid her down. Then he crossed over to where old Hank lay.

He knew at once, from the dreadful pallor of the wrinkled features, that the old man was dead. A large, black bruise on the left side of his face, trickling blood from skin broken at the temple, showed the cause. Old Hank had been hit a powerful, bone-crushing blow with some blunt instru-

ment. Bronson thought of Marak's blast-gun, and from what he had seen already, he knew he had the answer. Bronson rose to his feet, blue eyes burning with a terrible light.

THE CABIN had been ransacked. The cabinets and the wardrobe had been opened and their contents scattered about. The refrigerator stood open, too, its meager supply gone. Helen's flowers had been ruthlessly swept from their position on the kitchen window shelf, and the covers had been torn from the bed. Not even the arm chairs before the fireplace had been spared. These were wantonly tipped over on their sides.

Bronson did not try to revive Helen. Unconsciousness would temporarily postpone her anguish. She was exhausted from the hunt also, and would need rest for what lay ahead. He covered her with a blanket picked from the floor, and draped the quiet form of old Hank in another. Then he lit a fluorolite lantern and went out to the shed, where he began knocking together a crude coffin.

Bronson finished his task shortly before morning. He re-entered the cabin to find Helen sobbing softly. He held her against him, and presently she quieted.

Later, in the cold, grey dawn, they buried old Hank, next to the stone that marked the resting place of Helen's mother. Then Bronson helped the weeping girl back to the cabin.

"Stay here, honey," he told her. "There's something I have to do. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but don't worry about me. I'll be back."

Helen nodded dumbly, too far gone in sorrow to do any thinking. Bronson touched her bright hair; then, with a glance at the blast-gun swinging at his hip, he left the cabin. Pale flames leaped in the depths of his

blue eyes and his thin face was set in vengeful lines.

Bronson picked up the trail of Marak and Harper without difficulty, for their footprints showed quite plainly in the mud. He traced them around the further edge of the quillpod field and into the forest. He followed the tracks like a lean, stalking wolf.

Bronson's thoughts were bitter ones of self-accusation. He knew, now, that he had underestimated Marak. The tall outlaw's hatred for him had evidently overcome his fear, to the extent where he had returned to the farm with ambush in mind. Marak had found the cabin deserted except for old Hank, and the old man had died from the blow in its defense. Marak and Harper had then ransacked the place for valuables, taken what little food was left, and departed. But, Bronson promised himself, this was their last act of depradation.

He trailed the two hour after hour, never pausing to rest. The tracks led once to an old cabin deep in the forest. This showed signs of occupancy by Marak and Harper, and also those of a recent and hasty desertion. Bronson picked up their trail again and pressed on.

The day became steadily colder, and in the afternoon it began to snow. Bronson saw the thick, white flakes come sifting down with only a small part of his attention. Dim in his memory was the thought that there was something important and dangerous in this first snowfall. But just what it was he could not remember, nor, with his mind taken up with the duty before him, did he try.

THE VEGETATION thinned out and the ground became rough and rocky. Bronson paused a moment to find himself looking along a range of

high hills, which on Ganymede corresponded to mountains. The forest broke here, like a wave which had dashed ineffectually upon a high shore to leave little pools of water behind.

The tracks led along the base of the hills and down into a tiny, sheltered valley. And within this, before the mouth of a cave, a small fire burned.

Bronson's lips thinned in a cold, hard smile. He pulled his blast-gun from its holster, and slid like an icy-eyed ghost into the valley. He picked his way carefully along its side until he reached the cave mouth. Then he leaped down before the fire, half crouched, the weapon gripped ready in his hand.

Harper dropped his frying pan into the fire with a startled bleat. Marak, a piece of food held to his mouth, froze into rigidity. For a moment there was utter silence. The tableau held like a still from some three-dimensional movie.

Then Harper gave a soft cry and drew back from the fire. Marak slowly lowered his hand and swallowed.

"Which one of you did it?" Bronson asked flatly.

Marak moved his lips with an effort. "Did what, Gil?"

"One of you killed the old man in the cabin. I followed your tracks all the way here. Which of you did it?"

Marak shrugged. "Hell, Gil, we ain't been nowhere near the cabin. We kept away like you told us to. Me and Sam here are on our way to Ganyton."

"You were at the cabin!" Bronson spat. "The tracks I followed here are yours and nobody else's. Now, by God, don't try to put me off!" Bronson's terrible eyes swept them in growing fury. "Which one was it?"

Marak licked his lips and his gaze

flicked to the butt of the blast-gun at his hip. Harper's eyes were fixed in horrible fascination on Bronson's face, and his breath came harsh and fast through his loose, half-opened lips.

Bronson's voice lashed out like a whip.

"Which one was it?"

Harper's fear-distended eyes slid around to Marak. The tall, dark outlaw was watching Bronson with black eyes that had gone as beady and expressionless as those of a snake. He neither moved nor spoke. His jaw showed white beneath the stubble from a taut bunching of muscles.

The fire burned with a slow crackling and smoke drifted up lazily into the chill air. Snow fell from the low, leaden sky.

"It was you, Marak, wasn't it?" Bronson snarled.

Marak said nothing. There was only a sudden flicker of light deep in the depths of his black eyes.

HARPER emitted a thin whimper, his loose jowls shaking with terror.

"Was it *you*, Harper?" Bronson flicked his burning eyes at the fat outlaw.

"God, no, Gil!" Harper's voice shrieked out like air from a suddenly pierced balloon. "It was John, there! I didn't have a thing to do with it. I didn't want to go back to the farm—"

Marak abruptly leaned forward, and the back of his hand met Harper's lips in a loud, meaty blow. "Why, you damned, slobbering—"

"Marak," Bronson said, very quietly, "stand up."

"Listen, Gil, you can't—"

"Stand up, Marak."

"I couldn't help it, Gil—honest! The old man jumped on me. I acted in self-defense!"

"Stand up, I said."

"Gil, give me a chance!"

"You'll get it. Stand up!"

Licking his lips, Marak got slowly to his feet. Bronson took a step back from the fire. He pushed his blast-gun into its holster. Then he faced the other, his eyes things of deadly flame, hands hanging loosely at his sides.

"This is the chance you asked for, Marak. Draw!"

"Aw, Gil, you know—"

"Draw, damn you!"

Only the fire moved in the stillness. Its ruddy flames struggled valiantly for existence in the falling snow. The dusk of night pressed down around it like a vast, ebon monster hungry for light.

Harper sobbed thinly and crawled away from the fire. He shivered in the deeper shadows beyond.

Marak's tongue came out to lick his lips again, but suddenly his mouth snapped shut. With a muttered curse, his hand stabbed down to the butt of his blast-gun.

Bronson blew the top of his head off.

The dead thing that was Marak swayed a moment, its left hand holding a half-drawn blast-gun. Then, as the support of life departed from it forever, it fell with a thud, to lie face-downward in the fire.

Harper screamed and buried his face in his hands.

"Don't kill me, Gil!" Harper pleaded. "I didn't want to go back to the farm. John made me."

"I won't kill you," Bronson said contemptuously. "You aren't worth the energy it would take. But get this, Harper—get off Ganymede, and stay away."

Harper looked up eagerly. "Sure, Gil, sure! Anything you say."

Bronson turned, leaving the valley as silently as he had entered it. Only

then did reaction set in. He suddenly felt tired and weak, and the cold struck into him with numbing force. But he managed to drag himself deep into the forest, where finally he built a small fire and sat down to rest.

SOMETHING entered his awareness as he sat there before the fire. Snow. He watched the thick, white flakes drift lazily down. Once again a dim memory teased at the back of his mind. It was something connected with snow—something important and dangerous. And then he had it.

Rocket-bugs!

Clearly now, he recalled what old Hank had once said about them—that they appeared shortly before the first snowfall. And it was snowing now! He recalled, too, McCullough's statement that a swarm of the insects could eat a quili-pod field clean in less than an hour.

Sudden horror struck Bronson like a blow from a fist. The farm! If the rocket-bugs struck, Helen would be left utterly penniless! Heath would foreclose on the mortgage. And—

Bronson leaped to his feet and began to run madly through the forest. He stumbled and fell repeatedly, crashed into trees, and was torn by thorny vines and bushes. His heart pounded a throbbing rhythm of urgency. Things began to whirl crazily before his eyes, and each breath was like inhaling fire. Doggedly, desperately, he forced himself on.

Twice he got lost, and precious time was wasted in getting himself re-located. Each time he fell, exhaustion made it harder to rise. But he pressed on, thought of Helen and the farm an unfailing stimulant.

It wasn't until the middle of morning that he finally reached the slope which led down to the farm. He swayed at the edge, gasping for

breath, his apprehensive gaze searching the scene before him. The quili-pod field was covered with snow, and against the whiteness a multitude of tiny, red shapes darted and soared, a thin, brown gas streaming out behind them. At the farther edge a small figure was bent, picking quili-pods with desperate speed.

"Helen!" Bronson cried.

The girl straightened up, lifting the coat which she had draped protectively about her face. "Gil!" she answered.

At the gladness in her cry, Bronson found a new surge of strength. He ran down to her, gathered her into his arms.

"Gil, where did you go? I was so worried—"

"I went after those two men. Old Hank will rest easy now." Bronson looked into her brown eyes. "That part of it's over, Helen. Don't think or talk about it anymore. Promise me?"

"I promise, Gil." Suddenly she clutched his arm. "The rocket-bugs, Gil! We've got to work fast, if we hope to save anything!"

Bronson nodded quickly. Unmindful of the cold, he removed his coat and draped it over his head. Then, with a stamina drawn seemingly from the slender girl beside him, he began picking quili-pods. He worked with urgent haste, tearing the blue pods from their branches and flinging them into a basket. One after the other, one after the other.

IT WAS A desperate race against the inexorable progress of the rocket-bugs. Bronson's were filled with the surf-like pounding of his blood, and his eyes blurred with weariness. But like a goad, the shrill buzzing of the rocket-bugs around him drove him on to greater effort.

Of a sudden, the buzzing of the in-

sects seemed to increase in volume. Startled, Bronson looked up in time to see a new, red cloud come sweeping in from the forest. They descended upon the quili-pods with an eager, hungry rush, and in an instant the white field looked as though it had been stippled with blood.

"Gil—it's no use!" Helen sobbed. "We wouldn't be able to save enough to do any good. And it's too dangerous to stay out here now. Come on—into the cabin."

Bronson looked around in helpless rage. The tiny, red forms of the rocket-bugs seemed everywhere. They were a crimson nightmare horde that covered the entire field. And they were furious, all-consuming hunger. He shrugged in an admission of his helplessness, and keeping his coat tightly wrapped about his face, he followed Helen into the cabin. He closed the door against the devastation going on outside with a dejected sigh.

Helen sat in one of the arm chairs, sobbing brokenly. Bronson sat down on the chair arm and tried to comfort her. After a while, her sobs tapered off and she fell into an exhausted sleep. He picked her up, then, and tucked her into the lower bed. Only then did he feel the stupor of weariness himself. He sprawled his bruised, tired body in an arm chair and the blackness of sleep swept over him in a rush.

He awoke in the morning of the next day. Helen was still sleeping, and he did not disturb her. Her face was pale and drawn and the dark shadows about her eyes stood out starkly.

Bronson looked through the angled windows to a scene of desolation. The quili plants lifted empty branches to the grey sky. Pods and leaves had been stripped bare. Snow covered the ground in a thick, soft blanket. A sharp wind lifted thin layers of this

and sent them whirling and twisting.

Bronson returned to his chair and sat brooding. He knew that, with old Hank dead, Helen would have remained on the farm with him. He and the girl had stood a good chance for happiness. But the loss of the quili-pod crop not only meant a continuation of their poverty, but the loss of the farm as well. They would have nothing with which to pay Heath. And the banker would foreclose the mortgage, since he had doubtlessly been hit by rocket-bugs himself.

Bronson found himself contemplating a picture that was anything but pretty. He and Helen, utterly penniless—driven from the farm.

But what could he do? The thought of hiring himself out to one of the big planters was distasteful. He had heard from old Hank of the low wages paid to Venusian laborers, and he doubted that he would be given any more himself. Yet, except for farming, he knew no other means of earning money. Honest means, that is. Of dishonest means, he knew plenty. There was a temporary return to his former life of piracy, for one.

Of a sudden, Bronson's eyes widened, then narrowed. A thin, hard smile lifted at the corners of his mouth. He had found the solution.

HELEN AWOKE shortly before noon. She made soup from the bread-mushrooms and tree-rabbits which they had brought in from their last hunting trip together. They ate in silence.

That afternoon Heath appeared at the farm, in a large, luxurious rocket flitter. The planter was a slender elegant figure in a heavy, fur cloak worn over a blue, synthe-silk suit. His grey hair fell in artificially-curled ringlets about his shoulders. In one hand he held a glassite quili pipe.

Helen introduced the two men to each other. Then Heath immediately got down to business.

"Miss Strand, my mission here is an—ah—sad one, I'm afraid. What happened yestetrday" was an—ah—circumstance unprecedented in the history of quili-pod growing here on Ganymede. We planters were, you might say, caught flat-footed." Heath paused a moment.

"You see," he went on, "once every two decades or so, there are several moons that gradually line up behind this small world upon which we live, in such a way that when Ganymede reaches that portion of its orbit which brings winter, the moons behind it pull it out a bit farther and faster. Thus winter comes much sooner than it usually does, and is much more severe. This explanation was discovered only a very short time ago, since the event takes place so seldom in the—ah—interim everyone forgets about it. However, this is why the rocket bugs appeared so early and unexpectedly."

"I see," Helen said quietly.

Bronson watched the other man in dull bitterness for what he knew was coming. He knew that Heath's explanations had only been a preliminary.

Heath cleared his throat and frowned at his pipe. "We planters were all—ah—hard hit. Our crops are wiped out, in fact. And with a doubly severe winter facing us, our prospects for the future are—ah—not so good." He hesitated. "Miss Strand, under any other circumstances, I'd have been quite willing to allow you an extension on your mortgage—in fact, even another loan. But I'm afraid events have made it impossible for me to do so. We planters must now use every means at our disposal to—ah—recoup for our losses. I will have to foreclose on your farm when the date of payment on the mortgage is due."

"When is that?" Bronson asked.

"In—ah—two day's time."

Bronson leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Heath, could you give us an extension of two weeks?"

"Two weeks?" Heath echoed. He looked puzzled. "But, really, Mr. Brown, I don't see what good that would accomplish. You are—ah—quite plainly wiped out, and I don't see where you could find the money."

"I have a friend in Ganyton," Bronson explained. The lie had sprung quickly to his lips. "He's in my debt for a favor I once did him, and I'm sure he'd be glad to loan me the money."

"Oh, I see now," Heath tapped his pipe reflectively. "Two weeks," he muttered.

"You don't stand to lose anything," Bronson pursued. "You wouldn't be able to plant crops until spring, anyway. And I'm sure that the one-thousand credits of the mortgage would help you a lot in pulling through."

"Well, all right, then," Heath decided. "You can have an extension of two weeks." He shook hands and left.

HELEN CAME over to Bronson and put her hands in his arms. "Look at me Gil, she commanded "What are you going to do? I know you haven't any friend in Ganyton.

"Now dont worry about that, Helen. I have more friends than you know. Everything's going to be all right. Heath will get his money, and we'll keep the farm."

For a moment something trembled on the girl's lips that might have been an accusation. But her eyes lowered and she turned slowly away.

"I'll leave you with someone in Lloydtown," Bronson finished. "It won't be long. I'll be back soon."

"Yes, Gil," Helen responded dully.

Bronson's plans were ready to be

put into execution. He intended first to take Helen to Lloydtown. He knew the Strands were well liked there, and the girl would be welcome at any one of a dozen homes. From Lloydtown, he would beg a ride to Ganyton or Daley City. Either of the space port centers would do. He knew of certain contacts at both, who would see that he was properly outfitted. One, quick job pulled with the cool daring for which Gilbert Bronson had been famous, and he would be back, with nobody the wiser. Any news of his reappearance would be accepted as mere rumor, for he knew that he was generally regarded as dead.

He was certain that there would be no dangerous consequences. It was true that Helen seemed to suspect something, but he felt secure in the knowltruth. As for McCullough, the garrulous Sheriff would never connect the trip of Gil Brown, farm hand, with the mythical reappearance of the notorious, supposedly-dead Gilbert Bronson.

The rest of the day was spent in preparing the cabin for its coming vacancy. Helen packed what few belongings she possessed, and Bronson once more donned his tunic and space-boots. A sort of tacit, unspoken agreement was understood that the cabin would be left on the following morning.

Helen was silent, troubled. Her eyes avoided Bronson. Slumped in an arm chair, staring unseeingly into the fire while plans were being formed by the agile fingers of his mind, Bronson was too preoccupied to notice.

The next morning, just as they were preparing to leave the cabin, McCullough appeared in his rocket flutter. The Sheriff, bundled in a heavy fibrotext coat, looked weary and worn. His eyes beneath their thick brows were blood-shot and his heavy jaws were unshaven. He seemed strangely tense.

"I've seen what happened to the crop," he said slowly. "I'm darned sorry, honey. The same things happened to most of the farmers, though. What are you going to do now?"

"Leave the farm, I guess." Helen shrugged listlessly.

McCullough grinned to cover a sudden shyness. "Look here, honey, if your heart's still set on going to Earth, I'll see that you get the chance."

HELEN SMILED tremulously and shook her head. "Thanks, Sheriff, but I'm staying with Gil. I don't care to go anymore, anyway. Pop's dead." She gave McCullough the details briefly.

"I already know about it, and so does most everyone in town. You see, I finished hunting down those two men. There was only one left, though, a fat, little crook by the name of Harper. I put a little pressure on him, and he practically told me his whole life history. Harper told me that the other one, Marak, killed old Hank, and that Gil here killed Marak."

"Oh!" Helen cried softly, swinging around to Bronson. "Is that why you—?"

Bronson, seated upon a chair arm, nodded slowly. His blue eyes were fixed upon McCullough in a kind of expectant fascination.

"Helen," McCullough went on, his voice louder as if in sudden anger, "that crook, Harper, also told me something else." Abruptly, his right hand whipped from his coat pocket, and he levelled a heavy automatic at Bronson, who had risen to his feet. "Easy does it, Gil!" he snapped.

Bronson tensed, his thin features cold and drawn. He felt numbed, stunned. The last remnants of his little world were verging upon a final crash into oblivion.

Helen gasped. "Why, Sheriff, what's the matter?" Then she paled. She whirled and wrapped her arms tightly around Bronson. "Gil!" she sobbed.

"Helen, do you realize who that man is?" McCullough asked sharply. "He's Gilbert Bronson, the pirate!"

Helen turned to face him. "I know!" she flared. "I've known all the time!"

The vindictive triumph faded from McCullough's face, leaving it blank. His heavy body seemed to sag.

"Helen!" Bronson cried. "You knew?"

"Yes, Gil. You were delirious from fever when Pop and I found you. And before you got well, you told us everything about yourself—your Corporation farm on Mars, the death of your parents from hardship, your part in the Contract Uprising, how you had gotten tired of being a pirate, and—oh, everything, Gil."

"But, Helen, then why did you and Hank let me stay? Why didn't you tell me to go away?"

"We were sorry for you, Gil," she answered. "You had such a terribly hard life, from what you told us while delirious, that we wanted to help you." She smiled ruefully. "As it turned out though, you were the one who helped us."

BRONSON'S mind was whirling. A lot of things were fitting into place now. He remembered the humoring, unconvinced manner in which Helen and old Hank had acknowledged his introductions. He remembered, too, their strange silence when McCullough, on his first visit, had announced his supposed death. And he knew now why Helen had looked so sad when he told her of his intended trip to "borrow" money.

McCullough coughed uncomfortably. "Well, I have my duty to perform."

"No, you don't, Sheriff McCullough!" Helen snapped. She confronted him fiercely, her small fists planted firmly on her hips. "You'll take Gil out of here only over my dead body!"

McCullough backed away, his gun forgotten. He looked awed and disconcerted at the slender girl's wrath.

"Gil couldn't help being a pirate," she continued hotly. "The Corporation made him one, and you know how bad the Corporation was. Gil had to live, and piracy was the only way. He stole, yes, but from Corporation ships, or from big companies who wouldn't miss the loss. The only men he ever killed were those who needed killing. He's been blamed for a lot of other things he never did. Gil's fine and good, and I love him. He's got to have a chance to live an honest life. You can't take him away!"

McCullough nibbled one end of his drooping mustache, scowling uncertainly. He reached up his left hand and scratched the back of his grizzled head. Then a twinkle appeared in his grey eyes, and abruptly he grinned.

"All right, Helen, all right," McCullough surrendered. "Great space, girl, you don't have to take on so!" He stuffed the automatic back in his coat pocket. "I've never had a chance to have a daughter of my own, but you've sort of made up for it, and so I hope you know what you're doing."

"I do, Sheriff," Helen replied firmly.

McCullough turned his eyes to Bronson. "Doesn't look like I can turn you in, Gil," he remarked humorously. "But mind you, stay on the straight and narrow, or Helen'll help me attend to it next time. Won't you, honey?"

"I sure will, Sheriff," she answered, suddenly misty-eyed.

"Helen, Harper, and myself are the

only ones who know who you are," McCullough finished. "Helen and I will keep quiet about it, of course. And as for Harper, he won't try to tell anybody else after I get through talking to him!"

BRONSON SAID nothing, but his blue eyes were very warm and level. He extended a lean, brown hand and the Sheriff grasped it tightly.

With a little sob, Helen threw her arms around McCullough's neck. "Sheriff, you're wonderful!" she murmured.

McCullough patted her hair awkwardly. "Now, now, honey, don't take on so. It's a small thing to do for swell folks like you and Gil." He sniffed suddenly. "Catching cold," he muttered. "That's what comes of chasing crooks in my old age." But his grey eyes held a moistness that could not possibly have come from a cold. He gave Helen's hair another pat, shook hands again with Bronson, and then quickly left.

Helen came over to Bronson, and he held her tightly against him. He didn't know whether to feel bitter or glad. He had Helen and his freedom, but there was still the matter of the mortgage. Second only to the girl, the farm was dear to his heart. He couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

Bronson knew his last hope of obtaining the money to pay off Heath was gone. McCullough knew his identity, now, and he couldn't possibly hope for further leniency from the Sheriff if he went through with his plan of a temporary return to piracy.

He grimaced in desperation. "Helen, what are we going to do about the mortgage?"

"I don't know, Gil," she answered against his chest. "I'm too happy to think about it."

"But we've just got to," he re-

minded her gently. "And the sooner, the better."

"Frenth!" a strange, shrill voice from outside called abruptly. "Frenth!"

Helen pulled herself away from Bronson. "A Lisper!" she gasped. "Gil, what—"

Bronson went to the door and pulled it open. A Lisper stood at the farther end of the stone path. At sight of Bronson, it took a few limping steps forward.

"Why, it's the one we freed from the trap in the forest!" Helen exclaimed. "Come on, Gil."

THEY ADVANCED slowly toward the Lisper. "Hello, old fellow," Bronson greeted. "What can we do for you?"

The Lisper was bizarrely decked out in an almost bewildering array of bead necklaces, rings, bracelets, and gaudy shawls. In one hand it held a small leather bag.

And it was suddenly in Bronson's mind that no matter how far the earth peoples went into space, they would find other living, breathing entities. These entities would be shaped differently. They would be ludicrously formed or divinely proportioned by earth standards; but beneath the surface, all these entities would be basically all right. There would be the good and the bad of course, but the God-given spark of life contains in its very essence, the qualities of justice, mercy, and compassion. Humankind, Bronson felt, would instinctively reach toward the stars of dignity as well as the stars and nebulae of space. He looked again at the strange creature.

It took another limping step forward. For a moment its bear-like face

worked as though in pain. Then it spoke.

"Twap," said the Lisper. "Make swee. Now frenth." It extended the leather bag. "Give funguth-pearlths," it finished.

"Fungus-pearls!" His mind racing, Bronson took the bag. He opened it and a dozen yellow ovoids spilled out onto the palm of his hand. He stared at them, stunned and incredulous. By some mysterious means known only to itself, the Lisper had traced them here to the cabin. It had presented them with a bagful of fungus-pearls as a reward for having released it from the trap. Bronson, remembering what Helen had told him of the value of the jewels, knew that he held in his palm a sum which would pay for the mortgage many thousands of times over!

"Gil—it's giving them to us!" Helen cried. "I can't believe it. Oh, Gil, let me see them!"

He spilled them into her eager hands, and she examined them amid small sounds of delight and admiration. "Gil, they're beautiful!" And they were. All were large ones and flawless in their glistening beauty.

"Frenth?" the Lisper spoke again.

"Friends?" Bronson nodded soberly. "Old fellow, we'll never be able to tell you how much."

Suddenly the Lisper raised its arm and pointed at the shed. "Stay?" it questioned.

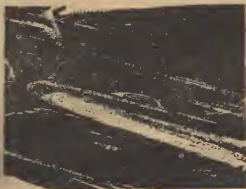
Bronson stared uncomprehendingly, but Helen laughed. "Why, Gil, it's adopted us!" she explained. "It wants to stay here, in the shed."

Bronson laughed, then, too, happily. "Stay? Why, old fellow, if you try to go away, I'll actually tie you up!"

THE END



Death and destruction thundered in the sky



THE BEAST

By Ivar Jorgensen

Only a beast of Briggs' stature could move with such diabolical cunning and certainty to put men under his power and tear out all their secrets with torture beyond conception

"ATTENTION, *Cosmic Dust*! Prepare to be boarded. Your stern is covered. Obey at once, or we open fire!"

Lieutenant Commander Dan Hartridge snapped into alertness at the controls of the *Cosmic Dust*. Was it possible? On the last leg of their trip to the Patrol Base on the Moon—would a space pirate dare attack the newest battleship of the Home Fleet?

"Dan!" a voice cried behind Hartridge. "It looks like Briggs and his crew—and they've got us with all screens down! Look!"

Hartridge glanced quickly at Gunnery Sergeant Herks and then back at the viewplate. Again came Herks' voice, sharp with urgency. "Briggs has us dead to rights, Dan. His projectors

could blast us to atoms before we could train a gun on him."

Hartridge glared into the viewplate at the shimmering hull of a space ship two kilometers astern. It was a slim tapering vessel and there was no denying the business-like attitude of the two thrusting nozzles that protruded from its bow.

"As you see," came the nasal voice from the receiver, "any resistance is useless. You have exactly forty seconds."

Sergeant Herks looked up at his superior.

"He's got us, Dan. Better lay to."

"Who the hell's runing this ship?" Hartridge thundered. Then suddenly the fierce gleam left his eyes. "I'm sorry Herky, I guess you're right at

that." He clenched his fists in resignation. His voice came hoarsely: "Lay to."

"WELL, WELL! A neat piece of booty if I do say so, eh Lieutenant?" A thunderous laugh followed and Wheeze Briggs clapped the trussed figure of Dan Hartridge on the shoulder.

"You've finally made a mistake Briggs—you were pretty safe as long as you stuck to freighters and passenger liners, but now that you've tackled the Solar Patrol, you've bitten off a bigger hunk than even you can chew!"

Again Briggs laughed. It was a wheezy laugh, but there was no laughter in his eyes.

"We'll see about that! And in the meantime, we've got business to attend to."

Dan glanced quickly about him. No, there was no chance at all for help. Herky was trussed in the far corner of the control room. And the Flight Engineer was propped in the doorway, his hands and feet securely tied. Of the rest of the crew of the *Cosmic Dust*, Dan knew nothing. But he knew that they were as helpless as their officers. Inwardly he cursed himself. He had been a fool! To fly the newest battle-cruiser of the Patrol without a single screen up. And then to be captured by a space pirate... It was too impossible—but it had happened. He would be lucky if it only meant the loss of his rank.

"And now, my lad," wheezed the pirate leader, reclining his pompous body in a leather chair before the control board, "what's the game?"

Dan glared at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Wheeze Briggs folded his fat arms and smiled cleverly. "Come now, Commander, you don't take me for that much of a fool, do you?" He leaned forward suddenly. "What's aboard the

Cosmic Dust that our omnipotent Government on Earth is so secretive about? You may as well tell me, I'll find it anyway!"

DAN'S FACE flushed in anger as Briggs said, "There are twenty different ways of getting men to tell me what I want to know. All men are flesh and blood—and nerves."

"You ought to know better than that, Briggs, you can't torture anything from the patrol."

"Maybe not," wheezed the pirate, an evil glint entering his eyes, "but we can try! Scarbo!"

There was a brief shuffling sound from without the control room and then suddenly a huge form squeezed through the doorway.

"Yeh, chief, what's up?"

"Scarbo," wheezed Briggs, "I want you to meet some friends of ours, who—desire a little refreshing of their memory!"

"If you think you'll ever get anything out of us, you're crazy!" Herky snapped furiously.

"Very well said, Sergeant, very well said indeed," Briggs wheezed, pausing to wipe his forehead with a silken handkerchief edged with gold threads. "Undoubtedly you are right—in part. You and the Commander do appear rather stubborn, but we'll see what your Flight Engineer has to offer. Scarbo, you may entertain our friends."

Outside the control room there was a chorus of harsh laughter, as the pirate crew in command of the captured vessel heard the order.

The grating sound of something heavy being dragged over the metal floor followed, and through the doorway a heavy-set man dragged a tall cumbersome apparatus into the room. Dan glanced at the cruel looking thing and felt a chill. It was an acid dripper! Could torture drag out informa-

tion on the *thought paralysis beam*?

"This apparatus," spoke Briggs, "provides a truly remarkable means of testing the endurance of the human body. You will note, Commander, that Scarbo is quite adept in its manipulation."

But Dan saw only too well. Waldo, the short, fat, ruffian was holding outstretched the left arm of the Flight Engineer, beneath a tapering funnel spout, made of glass. Above the funnel reared a semi-circular container of concentrated sulphuric acid. A small turn-cock separated the funnel from the container. Scarbo stood with his hand on this turn-cock, and there was fiendish delight in his eyes.

"All ready, Chief."

Wheeze Briggs glanced once more at Dan and Herky. Then he turned to the Flight Engineer. "Are you ready to talk?"

Carl's face remained impassive.

Briggs sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, have it your own way. Go ahead Scarbo."

Dan tensed as he watched. Scarbo slowly twisted the turn-cock, and a slight trickle of fuming acid rolled down into the funnel. It gathered at the edge of the tapering spout, grew into a smoking bubble, and then suddenly dropped.

There was a faint sizzle as the fuming acid struck Carl's outstretched hand. There was the nauseous odor of burnt flesh. And Carl's fingers stiffened and turned brown...

But the Flight Engineer didn't flicker an eyelash. If his face grew whiter, none could tell. Only his eyes showed agony. Herky sobbed from the far corner of the room.

"Hold on, Carl! Hold on!"

Carl held on.

WHEEZE BRIGGS watched closely and signalled to Scarbo. The burly pirate grinned.

"Put his head under here! We'll see if we can't improve his eyesight!"

Waldo sprang erect and grabbing Carl's feet, pulled him headfirst beneath the acid dripper. The Flight Engineer kicked out with his feet but the effort was useless. Waldo pinned him to the floor and held him there, his head directly beneath the tapering spout of the acid funnel.

Herky screamed with rage.

"You dirty fiends! You can't do it—it's inhuman!"

He tore at his bonds and the flesh around his wrists became purple and red. Scarbo just grinned. Wheeze Briggs sighed.

"Really, Sergeant, this is all so very unnecessary. All I desire is a little information—surely not worth all this distasteful procedure. Come now, what's the big secret?"

Dan gazed slowly at Herky. They both turned to Carl.

Nobody spoke.

"Well," Briggs sighed heavily, "I see that Scarbo will have to continue his entertainment." He waved a pudgy hand at the grinning pirate, and Scarbo nodded.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Scarbo twisted the turn-cock. A tiny trickle of fuming acid again ran down the funnel and gathered at the edge of the spout. Dan gazed horrified at the droplet and cold sweat broke upon his brow, as Carl lay tense beneath the spout gazing fascinatedly up at the smoking acid.

And then it fell.

There was a shriek of untold agonies, a scream that tore at the very nerve centers of Dan's body. There was a faint sizzle and a nauseous odor and then Carl cried hoarsely: "Stop it! My God! I can't stand it! Stop—I'll tell!"

Dan's thoughts were an agony. By all that was right he should urge Carl to resist—to endure the hell he was

suffering, to have his very life burned from his body by smoking acid. But he couldn't. He wanted to talk but he couldn't. He looked at Carl and suddenly became very sick.

Wheeze Briggs signalled, and Waldo released his victim and dragged the torture machine from the control room. Scarbo propped Carl up against a chair and forced brandy down his throat. Carl coughed hoarsely, moaned in agony from the burns, and in near incoherence, coughed out the secret of the Thought Control Beam which was to be taken to the Patrol Base on Luna....

"A NEAT little coup, if I do say so myself, eh Scarbo?" Briggs wheezed happily glancing at Dan. "We not only get a first class battleship from our beloved government, but their newest weapon along with it!" Briggs roared laughter, and Scarbo roared with him.

"But, come now, Commander," Briggs continued. "You and I have further business together." He arose from his chair and walked over to the chart stand.

Briggs turned slowly, his fat pudgy arms locked behind him. "If I recall correctly the *Cosmic Dust* was engaged upon another mission besides transporting the Thought Control Beam to the Moon."

And then the truth dawned on Dan. He was to pick up a gold consignment from the Moon! Briggs was actually thinking of going to the Solar Patrol Base on the Moon and picking up that gold shipment! The audacity of the thing stunned Dan.

"Yes, Commander, gold! The *Cosmic Dust* will pick up her consignment on schedule—but she will not return to Earth."

"You wouldn't dare!" breathed Dan. "You'd never get away with it!"

"We'll see about that," Briggs

wheezed. "And in the meantime we'll study the mechanism of our Government's new weapon." He smiled at the puzzled look on Dan's features and then continued in his wheezing monotone. "Oh, yes, quite contrary to your suppositions, I intend to return the Thought Control Beam to the Moon—after, of course, I have thoroughly gained a knowledge of its construction. You see, Commander, there is more than one way to play a game—and win!"

THE PATROL ship, *Cosmic Dust*, was a silver streak as it soared towards its destination at the Lunar Base. In the control room tenseness mounted.

"You understand the situation exactly, Commander?" Wheeze Briggs gazed at the sullen form of Dan Hart-ridge standing by the viewplate rubbing his swollen wrists. "For a final understanding," Briggs continued, his voice threatening.

"In exactly fifteen minutes we will land at the Lunar Base. You, Commander, will act according to schedule. You will first deliver the Beam to Central Headquarters, and without further delay will pick up the consigned gold shipment. Any slip or hesitation on your part will mean instant death for your crew and destruction of the Lunar Patrol Base." He smiled. "I believe we understand each other, Commander."

Across the room, standing silently, Herky saw the dismayed look in Dan's eyes. He knew this trip had meant everything to Dan. Position, esteem, experience, and to top it off, the girl he loved. He saw Dan's castles toppling in thin air. And a mist ran over his eyes as he watched. When all this was over it would mean disgrace for life, expulsion from the Patrol, and courtmartial. And the girl he knew was waiting down there, the daughter of their commanding officer, General

Fletcher Marsh, what could she think? Herky shuddered. Dan was almost a brother to him. He knew what this meant to Dan, but he also knew that he was powerless to prevent it.

"Prepare ship for landing. Stand by all stations." Lieutenant Commander Dan Hartridge's voice was keen with the assurance of one who knows he has a job to perform, and how to perform it. His hands were robots at the ship's controls and at every touch the slim vessel responded. There was a unity between man and machine.

But that was as far as it went. Dan's mind was a pit of despair and agony. Not only was he bringing about his own ruin—regardless of personal blame, but he was disgracing the entire Patrol as well. Briggs had planned it all too well. There wasn't to be a hitch. Not even to the burned corpse of the *Cosmic Dust's* Flight Engineer. Carl Floden had met an accident—an accident—while working in the ship's laboratories. He had been working with concentrated solutions of sulphuric acid, when a slight alteration in the course of the vessel had upset the container of smoking death upon him. . . Briggs had even seen to it that the laboratory floor was properly overrun with the acid, and in all, the accident was logical. . .

"Port cradle number five in readiness," cracked a monotonous voice from the open receiver. "Your bow is advancing too rapidly, check accelerations."

Dan squared his shoulders. The moment was at hand. He steadied the downward plunge of the ship and skillfully guided it through the open glass-ite ceiling of the Lunar Base. As he passed through the vacuous opening the ceiling began to close automatically, and when the ship had completely gone through, it sealed hermetically. Dan knew that huge pumps were filling the interior with air again.

"Easy, you're falling too fast!" The sharp voice cut out of the *Cosmic Dust's* receiver, and Dan rapidly thumbed the control buttons. The huge ship slowed and began to settle upon the waiting cradle. It landed

"**W**ASN'T THAT a beaut of a landing, Dad!" Betty Marsh smiled at her father in the central H. Q. offices of the Lunar Patrol Base. "I knew he could do it—why you'd almost think he'd been making spaceways for years instead of a first flight!" She put her arms around his neck affectionately. "Now aren't you glad I insisted that Dan get the maiden voyage of the *Cosmic Dust*?"

General Fletcher Marsh smiled. He squeezed his daughter tightly. "He's a good lad all right. Of course you realize I had the very devil of a time getting him the Commander's berth on the *Cosmic Dust*, but I guess he's proven he can handle the best." He looked into his daughter's clear blue eyes, "He's a good lad, Betty."

The girl rested her head upon his shoulder and smiled. "I've always known that, Dad. He's the only man for me."

A buzzer interrupted them. General Marsh flicked over a switch. "Yes?" he said.

"Commander Hartridge of the *Cosmic Dust*, sir."

"Send him right in." He flicked off the switch and squeezed his daughter reassuringly. "Now calm yourself, my dear, and let me handle him first. You can talk all you want after he hands in his routine report, but," he smiled, "duty first."

A sharp rap on the door broke in upon them. General Marsh turned. "Come in!"

The door opened and Dan stood up on the threshold. His heels clicked smartly and he saluted. "Hartridge of the *Cosmic Dust*, sir, reporting."

There was a queer tenseness in his voice which the Commanding Officer and his daughter mistook for excitement. General Marsh stepped forward and grasped Dan by the hand.

"Come in, my boy—and forget all formalities." He gripped Dan's hand. "You did a good job, Dan."

Dan turned his gaze aside and met the eyes of Betty Marsh. As he looked at her standing there before him, slim, utterly lovely, golden hair streaming back, her red lips parted in a smile—and that look in her eyes, Dan felt his courage melting away.

"Betty...."

The girl moved close to him. "I knew you'd succeed, Dan! I just knew it!"

"Ahem!" General Marsh had seated himself behind his desk and sat gazing at the two of them. "Dan and I have a few things to discuss now. Suppose you run over to your quarters and see how your packing's coming along." He turned to Dan, "Betty's bound to make the return trip to Earth with you." He smiled, "It's against regulations, strictly speaking, but you know Betty—she always gets her way...."

It took a few moments for the words to sink in for Dan. But finally they did.

"Pardon me, sir, but you said something about a return trip for..."

"Yes I did, Betty is bound she will make the return trip to Earth with you, and since there are only technical regulations involved, I believe it can be considered in order." He thumped his fist down upon the desk sharply. "And now young lady, I believe you have other things to attend to?"

Betty hugged her father affectionately. "O.K. Dad, I'll leave you two spacehounds to yourselves—but I warn you, don't take too long. Dan and I have things to discuss too..."

She walked around the desk, kissed Dan briefly on the cheek and left the room.

"WELL, DAN," began General Marsh, settling back in his swivel chair, "first of all make yourself comfortable. Here, have a seat." He motioned to one of the chairs and Dan seated himself. "Now then, tell me about the trip. No accidents, or—" he laughed, "pirates, I hope!"

The lump in Dan's throat grew. It grew until it threatened to choke him.

"No, sir, ah, no accidents to report..."

"Good. We should be able to run over the routine matters easily." General Marsh leaned forward. "I say routine because this entire matter has been handled by the home Government as strictly routine business. General Headquarters should feel highly pleased with your handling of the assignment. I presume the TC Beam is being transported per schedule to our laboratories?"

Dan nodded dumbly. "Yes, sir, Sergeant Herks is in charge of the shipment."

"Good! Our end is in order too. The gold is being loaded aboard the *Cosmic Dust* now." General Marsh looked keenly at Dan. "I must say, for a first run, and quite an important run at that, you're taking the situation quite soberly—one would think you'd been on the job for years... I'm proud of you, Dan, you're a credit to the Patrol."

Credit to the Patrol... Those words echoed in Dan's ears.

"Thank, you, sir, I—"

"I believe that about settles the matter," General Marsh glanced at his watch. "You're due out in twenty minutes, and I believe you have some things of your own to attend to."

Dan rose wearily to his feet and shook hands.

"About Betty, sir, I, ah..."

"Yes?"

"Do you think it's wise, sir, I mean, it's irregular..."

General Marsh looked closely at Dan for a few moments, then: "What's the matter, Dan—don't you want Betty to return to Earth with you?"

There was an agony in Dan's eyes. "It isn't that, sir, I want her to come—but, you see..."

"Yes?" There was puzzlement in General Marsh's look, and a frown.

"Well, I—I..." Sweat beaded Dan's face. He must tell him! He must!... But he couldn't, and he knew disaster for everyone of the Moon—"Nothing, sir—" He managed a smile, saluted briefly, turned, and hurriedly left the room.

DAN'S THOUGHTS were heavy as he walked slowly down the corridor towards the Officer's assembly. If only he had fought when Briggs first sent that warning through the receiver. If only he...

Laughter, gaiety, and song greeted Dan as he walked into the spacious rooms of the Officer's assembly. Many men looked up when Dan walked in, shouted a cheery greeting, and waved to him in friendly recognition. But Dan neither heard nor saw them. There was a tightness around his heart and a numbness creeping into his brain. Someone suddenly gripped his arm.

"Well, Dan?" Herky walked slowly beside him, eyes downcast.

"I couldn't tell him..." Dan sighed. "Betty's making the return trip with us."

"But she can't!" Herky gasped.

"I'm as well aware of the facts as you are, Herky," Dan said, his lips grim, "but what can I do about it? If I say anything, Briggs will wipe out

the Base. If I don't—well, there's a chance..."

"We've got ten minutes before take-off, Dan, I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

Dan opened the collar of his tunic and nodded.

"Oh, Dan!"

Dan wheeled at the sound of Betty's voice.

She came running up to them.

"Well, Commander Hartridge, are we ready to go?"

"Betty, I... I'm not sure..."

"You're not sure of what, Dan?"

There was a note of puzzlement in the girl's voice. Herky turned silently away.

"Betty, I, I really don't think you ought to go with us this trip—the gold and all..."

"Silly! If you're trying to scare me, you can't do it. Besides, if there are any pirates waiting to hold up the *Cosmic Dust*, I want to be along for the fun!" There was a twinkle of merriment in her eyes.

"But you don't understand, Betty, there's danger..."

"Why, Dan, you sound as if you expect something to happen... Don't you want me?"

"You know that isn't it, Betty, I want you, but..."

"No buts about it," she flared, "I'm going! Besides, if I'm ever going to marry a spaceman, I want to know something about his work." She put her arms around Dan's shoulders and looked up into his face. For a moment those features remained stern, but then a resigned defeat came into his eyes. He drew her close.

"Betty," he said tensely. "You know I love you and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. But I have another duty—the Patrol. That is my first duty." He halted and groped for words. It was so hard... "Will you promise me something?"

The girl looked at him. For a moment she wanted to laugh, but then she saw that Dan was serious. She nodded.

"If anything ever happens in my line of duty, Betty, that hurts you, and makes it look as if I've muffed my whole life, and yours too, promise me you won't believe it... Promise that you'll understand things as they are. Sometimes things happen over which we have no control. Always remember at such times, if and when they ever occur, that you and the Patrol mean everything to me, and that I'll spend the rest of my life righting that or any wrong that comes between us..." Dan looked at her. There was a light in her eyes which made his heart leap. He kissed her.

"Time to shove off, Dan." Herky stood inspecting his chronometer. Dan released Betty and turned.

"Everything checked? Shipment aboard?"

"Everything checked."

Dan stood for a moment undecided, then suddenly reached a decision. "Betty," he said, "you're staying here."

The girl looked at him, then she laughed, linking her arm in his. "Oh, no, you don't, skipper—lead on Sergeant!"

Herky shrugged silently and walked to the ship. Dan, scarcely knowing what to do or how to do it, followed, the girl holding onto him firmly. At the entrance, amid the shouts of final orders and directions, stood General Marsh, waiting for them.

"Give my regards to HQ on Terra, Dan. And," he smiled, grasping Dan's hand, "take care of that daughter of mine—she has a will of her own you know!"

"I know," Dan said. Fleetingly a smile crossed his lips. He wondered what General Marsh would say when the truth was known...

Herky moved up, saluted. "Schedule, sir." Dan gripped General Marsh's hand again and mounted the cradle steps. Herky followed. The outer airlock of the *Cosmic Dust* closed silently behind them...

"PERMIT ME to commend you, my dear Commander, on your splendid behavior in carrying out my orders. And more so, let me extend my appreciation for the rare pleasure of making the acquaintance of the daughter of our distinguished superior, General Marsh. Miss Marsh," Wheeze Briggs smiled, "the hospitality of the *Cosmic Dust* is at your disposal."

Betty Marsh turned a cold stare upon the bulbous figure of the pirate. "This is a ship of the Solar Patrol. Its hospitality, as far as you are concerned, is a cell!" She turned and faced Dan, her lower lip trembling.

"Er, if you please, Miss Marsh," Briggs said, a glint of admiration entering his eye, "this *was* a ship of the Solar Patrol. Its hospitality is mine, and how I choose to use it." There was a note of hardness in his voice. The note of one who has conquered and knows that he has. He turned to Dan, fondling a proton pistol in his huge hand. "Give me our exact position, please."

The *Cosmic Dust*, to all intents and purposes, was hurtling through the vacuum of space towards Earth. It had been hurtling for a half hour since it left the Lunar Base. And that half hour had been an agony for Dan. If he lived a million years he would never forget the look of pained surprise on Betty's face when she learned the truth. There had been astonishment, disbelief, and a hundred other kindred emotions displayed upon her delicate features at the same time. But then, as the impossible fact was impressed upon her, a transformation took place. She was unmoved. Cold,

calculatingly cold, and the strain of military blood that was inbred in her came to the fore. She was a Marsh—a part of the Patrol. The Patrol that hunted down and punished lawbreakers. She had looked at him closely and then laid her hands softly on his shoulders. There had been a look of understanding in her eyes when she said: "That's why you wanted me to stay, Dan. That's why you acted so strangely. Remember what you said before we left? Well, I remember, Dan..."

As he computed the position of the *Cosmic Dust* these thoughts ran through his mind.

"We're 30,000 miles from the Moon. Speed 60,000 miles per hour. Course 5 degrees per hour." Dan turned after completing his check.

Wheeze Briggs sighed.

"This has really been an eventful day for me. Our acquaintance has proven most enlightening and entertaining. I do regret the incident of your Flight Engineer—a most distasteful incident, but unfortunately, there was nothing I could do under the circumstances, and now," his voice took on a cold tinge of precision, "I believe it is time that we part company. You will have a sufficiently long enough journey in one of the emergency units, which I shall be glad to provide for you and your crew, to let my departure go smoothly." He sighed heavily and called: "Scarbo!"

"Yeh, chief?" The huge figure of the pirate leader's strong man squeezed through the doorway of the control room.

"Scarbo, prepare one of the emergency units. Our friends are leaving us. Have it ready in ten minutes."

"O.K. Chief," the big pirate rumbled, and then, as if he had forgotten something, added, "Oh yeh, Chief, I almost forgot. We got the dame's cabin all fixed up like you said." Scarbo grinned like a schoolboy and

squeezed himself out of the control room.

Dan stepped forward tensely. "What did he mean by that?"

WHEEZE BRIGGS sighed. "I wouldn't think of having Miss Marsh leave the *Cosmic Dust* without enjoying my hospitality. Especially when the emergency unit will be as overcrowded as it will be."

Betty stepped forward. "You wouldn't dare kidnap me!" Her voice shook with anger.

"Oh, come now, Miss Marsh," Briggs said, caressing the butt of his proton gun. "I wouldn't put it as harshly as that—let us say you are, my guest." He bowed and smiled.

Dan started to rush forward, but stopped as the proton gun was shoved into his stomach.

"Let's have no melodramatics, please," Briggs warned. "I shouldn't like to be forced to use this weapon. The sight of blood always sickens me."

Dan relaxed. It would do no good to be foolhardy. But the fury did not leave his eyes as he said desperately:

"You can't do that, Briggs. I won't let you!"

"It seems to me," Briggs wheezed, "that you are not in a position to do anything—except keep your mouth shut."

Betty drew Dan back. There was courage and defiance on her face as she faced Briggs.

"One thing you're forgetting Briggs, is that you're playing with men who know all the tricks of the game. You may have beaten the Patrol for the instant, but you won't last!"

"Today you've done things that put you down on the wanted list—dead or alive—and don't think for one moment that the Patrol won't catch up with you. Smarter men than you have tried to outwit the law, but they've all ended the same way, either in a death

chamber or on doom world! And you'll end up the same way!"

Briggs gazed closely at Betty for a few moments. Then a slow smile crossed his pudgy face. "My compliments, Miss Marsh, for a very pretty speech. But unfortunately, you don't scare me. Nor does that group of amateurs hiding behind the name, Patrol, either. As for my being a space-rat, that is a matter of opinion. One thing sure, is that when I'm done with this system the Patrol will wish they'd never heard of me! That is, if there's any Patrol left to wish!" He burst into laughter and Scarbo shoved his huge body in the doorway to see what was up.

Dan let a curse rip from his lips. That was the last straw! He suddenly hurled himself forward. Herky, standing idly on the other side of the room saw Dan tense and knew what was coming. He too sprang into action.

Dan hit Briggs with the speed of desperation. Briggs didn't have time to use the gun in his hand. He was suddenly hurled backwards as Dan's head slammed into his stomach and drove the air sharply from his body. He hit the far wall of the control room and slumped to the floor. Dan made a grab for the proton gun but a huge form suddenly crashed into him. Scarbo let out a roar.

"No you don't!" His fist smashed into Dan's jaw before he could protect himself. Stars flew before Dan's eyes but he grimly held on to consciousness. He couldn't lose now! Dan saw that huge fist arc back for another blow, but then something flashed through the air. It was Herky. He hit the huge pirate solidly in the midsection and Scarbo sagged. Dan struggled to his feet shaking his head to clear the fog from his brain. Herky smashed Scarbo a solid right to the jaw and the pirate fell over Briggs who was endeavoring to rise. Herky

dove for the proton gun. But he never reached it.

A SERIES of shouts reached their ears and suddenly an avalanche of bodies crashed into them. Dan and Herky lashed out fiercely but their efforts were doomed. There were too many of them. Some fell before the fury of the Patrolmen's fists, but there were always more to take their place. Dimly Dan knew that they were losing. And then he was hurled to the floor by sheer weight. His arms were spread eagled. He bit savagely on a hand that pushed into his face. The hand jerked away in pain, and Dan turned his head to see Herky fall before a dozen smashing bodies. Further resistance was useless.

Behind him, Dan heard Briggs groan as he struggled to his feet. Scarbo was rubbing his jaw tenderly. "Are ya hurt, Chief?"

"No," wheezed Briggs, painfully, rubbing his overfed stomach, "I'm not hurt, but somebody's liable to be—"

Scarbo rubbed his hands. His jaw was red. "Do you want me to give them a workout, huh, Chief?"

"No, Scarbo, we've wasted enough time as it is. Have you got the auxiliary unit ready?"

"Yeh, Chief, it's ready—but just let me take one crack at that guy—just one crack—"

"No! There'll be time enough for that later!" He walked up to where Dan lay, held stiffly by four wiry pirates. Suddenly a body shot past him and shoved one of the pirates aside.

"Dan! You shouldn't have tried it!" Betty brushed the hair from Dan's face and touched a long cut in his cheek.

Dan forced a smile. "At least I had the pleasure of pushing Briggs' stomach in a few inches."

"If I had a little more time, Com-

mander," Briggs wheezed, "I can assure you you'd regret your actions. You may later, if and when we meet again." He motioned to the men holding Dan. "Load him aboard the space boat." He turned to where Herky lay sprawled, "Him too.

"And now, my dear young woman," Briggs turned to where Betty was standing, watching the men shove Dan to his feet, "Scarbo will show you to your quarters."

Betty turned a pleading eye towards Dan. "I'm not afraid, Dan, tell Dad. And," there was a hesitation in her voice, "I'll be waiting for you when you come to get Briggs." There was a smile on her face as Scarbo shoved her into the corridor.

Briggs turned.

"And now we'll get you on your way, Commander." He motioned to the pirates who held Dan firmly and they shoved him from the control room.

Down the long corridor to the central airlocks they went. The inner door was open, revealing the sleek form of one of the auxiliary units. The crew of the *Cosmic Dust* was already in.

Briggs came up as the pirates released Dan.

"Extend my compliments to General Marsh, when you get back to the Lunar Base. Thank him, for me, for the present he's made of the Patrol's newest pirate chaser! You can also thank him for the plans to the Thought Control Beam. At least we'll be on an equal footing from now on!"

Briggs moved closer. "And you can also tell him his daughter will be returned when I receive \$50,000." He waved a fat hand. "Of course, this is a trivial sum compared to the haul he's already given me in gold today,

but nevertheless, he'll pay—through the nose!" Briggs motioned to his men. "Put him in." Five of the pirate crew moved forward and shoved Dan into the space boat. Herky was shoved in after him.

Briggs holstered his proton gun and looked coldly at Dan.

"When General Marsh gets ready to deliver the money, he can leave it at Finston's Tombstone outside Mars City. And tell him not to pull any fast ones. If more than two deliver the money, and there is any funny stuff, Miss Marsh will be the loser.... Regards, Commander, and Bon Voyage!"

Dan wearily closed the airlock of the space boat and made his way through the crowded quarters to the control board. Herky was seated before the controls, waiting.

"Shove, off, Sergeant," Dan said hoarsely.

Herky flicked over a button and the outer airlock of the *Cosmic Dust* opened. With a blast of power the small space cruiser shut out from its cradle and was lost in the blackness of space...

THE ASSEMBLY Chambers of the Home Government on Tellus were crowded. Every important official from the entire system was present. They were waiting for the report of the Military Committee on the astonishing piracy of the fleet's newest super-battleship, *Cosmic Dust*. But the Committee were busy.

It was meeting in the Military Affairs room, hearing the case of Lieutenant Commander Dan Hartridge, on trial. Dan stood before the bar.

"And that, gentlemen, is the story." Dan relaxed. Relating the incidents from the moment Briggs had waylaid the Patrol vessel, to the time they had

returned to the Lunar Base in the space boat had taken up the good part of an hour. Dan's throat was dry and his nerves on edge. Facing a commission of the highest ranking military men in the system was bad enough. But when his entire future life, personal honor, and the reputation of the Patrol as well, hung in the balance, the ordeal was terrifying. A general murmuring arose following Dan's narration. He glanced slowly about him. His gaze met stern faces. Hope sunk in his breast.

General Marsh tapped lightly for order.

"Gentlemen, you have heard the testimony." Marsh's face was haggard. His eyes were sunken and his shoulders sagged.

"We've learned something these last few hours. We've learned, too late, that the forces of organized piracy are much more advanced than anyone has dreamed of. We're paying for that.

"The Solar Patrol has always prided itself on the efficiency, capability, and foresight of its Officers and men. One of those men stands before us now, who, through negligence of duty has caused the Patrol and the whole system as well, to suffer a terrible defeat. The greatest weapon ever to come from our laboratories is now in the ruthless hands of a daring pirate. And with it the newest of our super-dreadnoughts. That this pirate has kidnapped my daughter and stolen a huge shipment of gold, is unimportant beside the major issues. . . . Commander Hartridge stands before us in admittance of negligence at his command." He looked around the room slowly at the tense faces of the court. "What is the decision of the court?"

Dan glanced quickly around him. There were, as nearly as he could judge, thirty high-ranking Officers of the Patrol. They all looked toward

General Marsh. And their eyes spoke. Dan knew what was coming even before General Marsh spoke.

"Commander Hartridge, it has been the duty of this court to hear your case. While events which have occurred were not entirely due to your making, gross negligence of duty cannot be overlooked or tolerated." He stopped to clear his throat.

"The court finds you guilty of the charges. You will turn in your uniform immediately."

Dan felt his shoulders sag. His heart had ceased to beat. Dimly the words registered upon him. —"*Turn in your uniform immediately!*"

Forcing himself to stand erect, Dan prepared to leave. His whole life's ambition—the Patrol was now a memory.

A courier suddenly dashed into the room.

"General Marsh, sir!" The courier was out of breath. Marsh looked up.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Sir, a report has just come in from the Patrol of Saturn—Wheze Briggs with a huge fleet of pirate ships and the *Cosmic Dust*, armed with the TC Beam attacked Doom World and liberated the prisoners! The Patrol didn't have a chance when the Thought Control Beam was turned upon them!"

Had a bomb fallen in the chamber, the bedlam could not have been more complete. Men had risen to their feet in consternation. Doom World—the most impregnable prison colony in the system! Dan felt his despair deepen. He had been responsible for this too. . . .

Not daring to look at General Marsh Dan left the room. . . .

DAN WAS sitting at a bar two days later when Herky found him. He walked up to the table silently and sat down. Dan raised his eyes from

the half-empty glass in his hand and stared.

Herky fidgeted uneasily.

"I—I heard about your... I'm sorry Dan..."

"Forget it!" Dan mumbled, returning his gaze to the glass. "I had it coming to me."

Herky looked away.

"Got any plans made?" he asked hopefully.

"None."

"Well, you don't expect us to hang around bars all day, I hope!"

Dan looked up from his glass. "I don't get you. Did you say, us?"

Herky nodded. "Yep. I resigned from the Patrol this morning..."

"You what!" Dan shouted, rising from his chair.

"Take it easy," Herky smiled. "If I want to resign from the Patrol that's my business. Besides, I can't let you brood your life away over a bottle. We're going into business."

Dan looked at him in astonishment.

"What sort of business?"

Herky reached over and poured himself a drink. "You know that old tub Uncle left me in his will, the *Martian Maid*?"

Dan nodded, frowning.

"Well, it's not much good, I know, but it'll serve as a start. We're going to open up a freighting business between the Asteroids and Mars. Ore shipping is quite a racket."

Dan smiled for a moment and then turned to his glass again.

Herky sighed. Dan's thoughts, he saw, were far from their new freight business.

"If there was only some way we could get a line on Briggs before it's too late." Dan groaned and tipped the glass upward.

Herky tapped the table methodically.

"Yeh, but we haven't got any line on him!"

Dan nodded. "You think that he'd make just one little slip. But he hasn't. Even as far as Betty..."

"I got some news about her," Herky interrupted.

Dan jerked erect.

"You what?"

"Take it easy. What I meant to say is, word slipped out that General Marsh is going to comply with Briggs' demand and leave the ransom money at Finston's Tombstone this week. I don't blame him—there isn't much else he can do..."

A feverish gleam suddenly shot into Dan's eyes. He looked at Herky closely and gripped his arm.

"Herky, I think I've got an idea! It's a damn slim chance, but..."

Herky leaned over the table eagerly.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" he snapped. "Let me in on it!"

Dan stared at him. "You say the *Martian Maid* is in running shape?"

Herky nodded. "Yeh, why?"

"Because you and I are leaving for Mars tonight! We've got a date to keep with Briggs and I don't want to keep him waiting!"

IT WAS dark and cold on the edge on the Martian desert. A keen wind whipped around the rock pinnacle behind which Dan and Herky were crouching. Phobos was a tiny sphere in space, moving swiftly towards the East. Finston's Tombstone loomed whitely some twenty yards from where they hid, covering the grave of the early pioneer that rested there. Dan could very dimly make out the bronzed plaque on the tombstone.

"This place gives me the creeps!" Herky complained, pulling his leather jacket tighter about him. "I hope to hell we don't have to spend another night out here!"

"I don't think we will," Dan said grimly. "I have a feeling that tonight's

the night!" He renewed his grip on the automatic in his hand. They had been waiting out here for two successive nights now. But nobody had showed up. Dan had a feeling that things were about to happen.

Beyond Phobos, edging slowly over the horizon, a pinpoint of light grew. The point became larger and resolved itself into a space ship. There was no doubt in Dan's mind about its destination. It was headed straight for them. Dan nudged Herky.

"Now don't make a sound! That's probably a ship from General Marsh, carrying the ransom. Lay low. They mustn't see us."

The ship landed presently and a figure left the port airlock. Walking slowly through the darkness, dispelled only by the light of Phobos and the glow emanating from the control room, he stopped by the Tombstone and put a bulky package at its base. Then, as quickly as he had come, he left.

The ship shot into the sky with a blast of its underjets. It dwindled to a pinpoint of light and vanished. Herky swore.

"Well, I hope to hell something happens soon!"

Another pinpoint of light was resolving itself into the outline of a spaceship. It grew beyond the rim of Phobos. Dan tightened his grip on the automatic.

"Well, you'll get your action now! Unless I'm greatly mistaken, that's Briggs' men!"

Herky shook his head doubtfully.

"I hope to hell you know what you're doing. If anything goes wrong Briggs will take it out on Betty."

"This is our only chance," Dan replied grimly. "We've got to take it—and make sure nothing goes wrong."

They lapsed into silence as the ship grew and lanced down towards the ghostly shape of the Tombstone. With a blast of power from its under-

jets it landed. Dan could see it was only a small cruising job. Probably carrying no more than two or three men. The airlock hissed open and two figures stepped out upon the sand. They looked furtively about them for a few moments, and then assured, they made their way to the Tombstone and the bulky package at its base.

Dan and Herky slowly left the confines of their hiding place. They slunk noiselessly along the sand and came up behind the pirates.

"Up with your hands! —Herky, take their guns!"

The pirates wheeled at the sound and stared uncomprehendingly at them for a few seconds. Dan recognized one of them, a fat blocky man, whom Scarbo had called, Waldo. Waldo recognized Dan too.

H HE GRABBED for his gun and leveled it. Dan acted instinctively. His finger contracted on the trigger of his automatic and a slug tore its way through the pirate's chest. For a second he remained standing, his eyes wide with fear. Then, blood gushing from his mouth, he sprawled upon the sand. The other pirate dropped his weapon instantly. Dan and Herky moved in close.

"That's one for you, Carl!" said Dan grimly, thinking of the tortured face of the *Cosmic Dust's* late Flight Engineer. He motioned to the remaining pirate whose face had taken on an ashen look.

"Make any funny moves and you'll get the same thing!"

The pirate raised his arms.

"Where is Briggs hiding out?"

The pirate forced a smile on his lips. "Try and find out."

Dan shoved his automatic in the pirate's stomach.

"You've got exactly two minutes. If you don't come across by then this gun is going to go off."

Silence descended upon them. Silence that was broken only by the cold Martian wind. The seconds ticked.

Sweat had begun to stand out on the pirate's forehead. Cold sweat that ran down into his eyes. His lips began to tremble. There were only fifteen seconds to go. Dan's finger tightened on the trigger of his gun. Beside him Herky drew in his breath. Five seconds.

And then the pirate broke.

"Stop! I'll tell! Don't shoot!"

Dan relaxed his grip upon the weapon but did not remove it from the pirate's stomach.

"Start talking! Where is Briggs hiding?"

"On Phobos!" the pirate blurted out.

Dan's eyes gleamed. "Has he got Miss Marsh there—and is she safe?"

"Yes."

"Is the *Cosmic Dust* there and the criminals from Doom World?"

The pirate nodded miserably. But then a crafty gleam entered his eyes.

"But a lot of good it'll do you to know! At the first sign of an attack the dame'll be taken care of—and then whoever's doing the attacking will be put out of the way."

Dan smiled. "You're forgetting that we have the TC Beam too. And we'll have a lot more than Briggs!"

The pirate sneered. "They won't do you any good—Briggs invented..." He caught his lip and kicked up some sand. He had nearly let something slip.

"Briggs what?"

"Nothin'. I didn't say nothin'."

Herky broke in.

"We've found out what we want to know, Dan. Let's not waste any more time!"

Dan nodded. "You're right. Take that package over there and get back to our ship. Head as fast as you can for Luna and tell General Marsh

everything. Tell him to attack Phobos in twenty-four hours. And tell him to put everything he's got into the fight!"

Herky hesitated. "But what about you? I thought..."

"I've got a little date to keep on Phobos... Now get going!"

Herky shrugged helplessly. He picked up the package as Dan herded the pirate into the tiny cruiser.

"Be careful, Dan." Herky called after him.

Dan turned his head smiling. "Don't worry about me—but remember, twenty-four hours!"

The airlock hissed shut after him. Herky watched as the little ship shot into the sky and headed East. Then he strode quickly over the sand towards the *Martian Maid*, a half mile away...

PHOBOS WAS a glowing ball in the sky that grew. Dan watched it grow from the control room of the tiny speeding ship. Grimly he kept his automatic trained on the back of the pirate, who stood sullenly guiding the ship.

"Don't try anything funny when we land," Dan warned him. "Act natural."

The pirate kept his silence and Dan turned his attention once more to the viewplate. They had been enroute two hours already.

The little ship shot downward toward the rocky surface of the Martian satellite. The moment was at hand. Then, before Dan's startled gaze, a huge section of rocky wall folded back as they approached. The pirate skillfully guided the ship through the opening. With a blast of underjets they landed. Dan drew his breath in sharply.

"All right now, no funny business," he said sharply, gazing into the viewplate at the vastness of the caved interior. Far down the line he could see

a huge group of spaceships, and around them, working busily, hundreds of men. Dan could guess that these must be the criminals from Doom World. And then Dan's heart leapt. Standing not twenty yards away loomed the huge shape of the *Cosmic Dust*! And out of the port airlock came Wheeze Briggs—with Betty!

Obviously Briggs thought the men in the little ship were bringing back the ransom for her release. Dan squared his jaw and motioned the pirate towards the airlock. Briggs was due for a surprise!

When the airlock hissed open, the pirate walked out with Dan behind him. Briggs was waiting for them. His jaw fell open in amazement. Dan smiled.

"Surprised, aren't you?" he said, thrusting his gun forward. "Just stand still and nobody will get hurt."

Dan passed a quick glance at Betty. Her face had turned white for an instant, and then elation sprang into her eyes. But Dan didn't have time to notice. He glanced back at Briggs. The fat pirate had regained his composure and was eyeing Dan with amused scorn.

"This is a surprise, Commander," he wheezed. "I suppose you've come to escort Miss Marsh back to Earth after handing over the ransom?"

"That's right," Dan bit out, "I'm taking her back to Earth, and you too—in the *Cosmic Dust*, and without any ransom!"

Wheeze Briggs shot a malevolent glance towards the pirate Dan had subdued on Mars. Dan saw the glance.

"I had to persuade your men to see things my way. One of them didn't..."

Briggs' face turned red with anger. But Dan smiled.

"And now turn around with your hands at your side,"

Briggs began to turn.

Betty suddenly gasped. Dan looked at her in alarm. Her hand flew to her mouth and her eyes stared wide. She was looking over his shoulder.

For a split second Dan stood there. Then he spun. But too late.

Suddenly the back of his head came into violent contact with the blunt end of a metal bar, and Dan fell, his head exploding stars, and then blackness...

DAN CAME to with a dull ache pounding at the back of his head. He stared about him for a few seconds dazedly. He tried to lift his hand and rub the back of his head. But he couldn't. Then memory flooded back.

He lay trussed in the control room of the *Cosmic Dust*. Beside him lay Betty, tied as efficiently as he. Sitting smiling before the control panel, was Wheeze Briggs. Dan cursed beneath his breath. All he remembered was a loud roar and then darkness.

"So you've finally come out of it?" Briggs looked down the fat of his face at Dan as he lit a black cigar. "You've been out for about fifteen hours, and I was almost afraid Scarbo had killed you. As it is you'll live to see the show."

Dan frowned. His head was still thick and the ache annoyed him.

"What show?" he muttered.

Briggs blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. "Using your own words, General Marsh and the Solar Patrol should be along in a few more hours. It was twenty-four when you left Mars, but over seventeen hours have passed since then. And when the Patrol arrives, we'll be waiting for them!"

"I wouldn't be so confident, Briggs," Dan said, "you forget that the Patrol has the TC Beam too."

Briggs smiled and drew on his cigar.

"The Patrol is in for a little surprise," he said. "During the past few days I've had the Thought Control Beam thoroughly analyzed by experts. And we found something. Do you see that machine over there?" He pointed a pudgy finger towards the side of the control panel, where a small compact machine was attached. "Well, that little gadget throws out a static interceptor wave, strong enough to nullify the TC Beam. When the Patrol arrives for our little party, we'll turn that gadget on. Their Beam won't be worth two cents! But ours will! And then we'll see who's surprising who!"

Dan was stunned. Without the TC Beam to aid them, the Patrol fleet would be beaten by Briggs and his unblanketed Beam!

Suddenly a huge form squeezed through the control room door. It was Scarbo, Briggs' lieutenant.

"Say, Chief, we got trouble with them new projectors. You better help out."

Briggs sighed and pulled himself from the chair. Scarbo glanced venomously at Dan.

"Maybe I better watch em, huh, Chief?"

Briggs shook his head.

"They're safe enough. Besides, this won't take long."

Scarbo shrugged and followed Briggs through the door. Dan and Betty were alone.

Betty turned over on her side and looked at Dan.

"Tell me," she said, "what's happened since Briggs left the Moon?"

Dan told her everything. Then they both lapsed into silence. Dan's thoughts were a despairing jumble. All he could think of was the trap he had led the Patrol into. If only there was something he could do to prevent it. If only Briggs' TC Beam were affected too. But it wasn't. Dan looked

glumly across the Control room at the Control panel. The dread weapon was mounted beside it, next to the little machine Briggs claimed would blanket any opposing Beam. Dan gazed at it. If only he had the use of his arm he could tear it to pieces. But his arms were firmly bound. There was nothing he could do.

Then he tensed. Betty noticed it.

"What's the matter, Dan?"

He ignored her. His mind was racing. There was an idea taking shape in his mind. A dim, nebulous idea, that sent his pulse pounding. If only Briggs didn't return for a few minutes! Dan hunched his body up and began rolling over the floor...

THE CONTROL room of the *Cosmic Dust* was a beehive of activity. Briggs and the pick of his private crew were huddled about the Control panel making final adjustments and checking the ship's weapons.

The time had come. The Solar Patrol fleet had been sighted off Deimos, and Briggs was ready. Dan and Betty lay in one corner of the room, watching. Briggs came up.

"And now you'll get a chance to see the Patrol wiped out of space!" he roared, throwing his head back in wheezing laughter. "In less than a half hour the whole Solar Patrol fleet will be nothing but a memory!"

Scarbo edged up.

"They're gettin' close, Chief."

Briggs turned away from the two trussed figures and strode to the control board. He flicked over the controls lightly. The *Cosmic Dust* shot out of the rocky opening in Phobos' side and soared into space. Behind it the massive pirate fleet followed until the skies were a mass of silver ships.

Through the viewplate Dan could see the distant armada from Earth

come into view. It grew with each passing second, and sweat stood out on Dan's forehead. Beside him Betty trembled slightly.

The seconds ticked by. Then the two huge fleets began a wide circling movement. The moment of action was at hand.

Briggs and his man laughed loudly as they saw the guns of the Patrol leap into action. Bursts of flame shot into the pirate fleet from long range guns. And then Briggs turned and flicked on the little machine beside the TC Beam. There was a slight crackling sound and a steady hum that soon grew faint. If Briggs were right, the Patrol's greatest weapon in the battle was now useless.

The next ten minutes were an agony for Dan. He could imagine the astonishment of the Patrol when the TC Beam failed to work. Briggs had been right...

The pirate fleet had settled down to a grim battle. The blackness of space became incandescent with the light of a thousand spitting guns. Then Briggs suddenly turned the *Cosmic Dust* directly into the path of the Patrol fleet, and his hand shot out for the TC Beam control. Dan looked quickly at Betty.

"This may be the end for us," he whispered, "but there's a chance... Blank out every thought in your mind, Betty. For God's sake don't even let a thought form! When Briggs switches on that Beam, hell is going to break loose." Sweat glistened on Dan's brow. He whispered again. "Blank out your mind, don't think!"

The girl's face was white, but she nodded. Dan turned on his back and sighed. His mind seethed with the thought—"mustn't think, mustn't think"—then the thought stopped. Dan and the girl lay quietly.

"**H**ERE GOES!" Briggs rasped eagerly his hand gripping the

switch of the Thought Control Beam. "In another ten seconds we'll blast every ship of the Patrol from space!" He shoved the switch home.

For a moment there was a loud hum.

Then there was a roar.

Then there was an explosion.

But it wasn't an audible explosion.

Briggs and his men suddenly screamed and gripped their heads. Terror and madness glistened from their eyes. The explosion grew in their brains and tore...

Dan and Betty lay in the corner, their minds as blank as they could make them. But a loud humming grew in their brains too. It threatened to tear them apart. It reached a crescendo. Briggs and his pirate crew fell limply to the floor of the control room, eyes staring into space. The roaring suddenly ceased as a puff of smoke arose from the TC Beam. Dan and Betty lay bathed in perspiration. Their heads ached terribly.

"Betty!" Dan's voice was hoarse. "Are you all right?"

The girl turned painfully toward him. "Yes," she whispered.

Dan rolled over to the limp body of one of the pirates and managed to work a knife from his belt. Frantically he sawed at his bonds.

The *Cosmic Dust* suddenly gave a lurch. An explosion rumbled through the ship. The Patrol had their range! In another few seconds they'd be blown apart!

The ropes parted at his wrists and Dan hurriedly slashed his ankles free. Then he sprang to the control board and flipped over the controls. The *Cosmic Dust* shot over in an arc as a huge projectile hit the spot where they had just been. Casting a hurried glance at the battle scene, Dan flicked on the televisor. All around him ships were locked in deadly combat. But the Patrol was winning! One after another the pirate

ships were being blown to bits.

"Dan Hartridge on the *Cosmic Dust* calling General Marsh!"

General Marsh's face suddenly appeared on the screen.

"Thank God, sir! In another few seconds you'd have blown us apart! Wheeze Briggs and his men are dead, sir. I'm in command of the *Cosmic Dust*. Betty is here with me, safe."

General Marsh's features relaxed. He turned to give an order. The fir-

ing at the *Cosmic Dust* ceased.

"Fall out of line immediately!" General Marsh rapped out. "You're in the way. I'll contact you again when we've cleaned up this mess."

The televisior clicked off. Dan sighed and shot the huge vessel up and out of the fray. Then he turned and released Betty. There were tears in her eyes as he took her in his arms....

THE END

When The Earth Was Young

By Omar Booth

TO THE DAWN-PEOPLE, Gur was strange. Sometimes he went with the Pleistocene tribe and sometimes he stayed away as long as several moons. Flat-head, who was the Leader, did not like this, because he wanted to tell all the young men when they should hunt and where but Gur would not listen to him.

Nor did he try to make Gur listen as he would have done with any of the others. He had tried that once and he still bore the scar of Gur's flint knife on his shoulder. He knew he could not kill Gur save by deception, and even that was too dangerous. As long as Gur made no issue of his chieftainship, and he never did, he would not press him. That was the first of Gur's strangenesses. He had defeated Flat-head in combat, and yet he had not killed him nor had he taken the role of leader.

The old people, the women and the young hunters talked about this often. But they could not understand Gur's ways.

But this was not Gur's only strangeness, this and his aloofness from the tribe. He did other odd things too. Ka's daughter Ka-La was desired by all the males of the little band, but she had eyes and heart for no one but Gur. His lithe handsomeness drew her to him—and he was such a good hunter too, when he wanted to be.

One day she asked him, "Am I not good to look upon, Gur? Would I not be a good mate? Do not all the hunters want me?"

Gur looked up from the flint knife he was working to a razor's edge and nodded.

"Yes, Ka-La," he agreed, "all these things are true."

Her eyelashes fluttered prettily. "Then why do you not want me?"

"You are not for me, Ka-La," Gur answered, not unpleasantly, but patiently,

as if he were instructing a child.

"I do not understand you," Ka-La said angrily. With a toss of her pretty head, she walked away and thereafter she said nothing to him. But still she did not mate.

Gur was not only strange in these ways. He spent many hours with the old men, learning how to work the flint and stone, learning how to chip a rock and how to hone an edge on a weapon with water and sand. This was unheard of for a hunter. Their weapons were made by the old men and that was enough. It justified the old ones' existence. But Gur was not content to take his weapons. They had to be made by himself.

As a result of all these things, Gur was not liked by anyone. His courage and might as a hunter and warrior were unquestioned and so he was left to his own devices, even though there were some who muttered against him.

Gur did not gorge himself and fall asleep after a successful hunt and he did not sit and chew leaves and grass by the hour. Always his mind churned and fermented and he was asking things. Even when he was a child this quality did not engender him to his parents.

The Dawn-People lived simply and while they fed well because this was good land, rich in small game, it also abounded in the bigger animals who made their lives miserable many times. Hunters would return laden with deer-carasses and the smell of the freshly killed meat would bring the killers on their trail. A saber-toothed tiger might suddenly bound into the group and kill two or three hunters before the rest could get away. The Dawn-People were helpless, except for the sheer flight against the killers like the saber-toothed tiger and the giant buffalo or the mastodon.

WHEN THE EARTH WAS YOUNG

And this was what bothered Gur. Always he thought about it and he realized that against the huge claws and powerful fangs of a rippling-muscled animal like the saber-toothed tiger, the flint knife of the hunter was useless. And so his mind thought and thought about this.

Abstraction and extension of this thought to other weapons occurred to none of the Dawn-People. Had not they and their ancestors used flint knives through all time? It did not occur to anyone to think of another tool for killing.

It occurred to no one that is, except Gur.

And this was what was on his mind. And the more he thought about it the more puzzled he got. A bigger flint knife was not the answer. He had tried that and found it only to be huge and weighty and unwieldy, useless for the rapid work of fighting and killing.

The flint knife itself, the ordinary tool of the Dawn-People was of no use in fighting the killer animals. To get close enough to use it, you had to come within range of claw and fang—and then you were dead.

One day Gur went out into the jungle which surrounded the small clearing that served as home for the Dawn-People and killed a small deer and because he was hungry, he sat down and struck a fire to cook one of the haunches.

While his strong white teeth were tearing into the half-burnt, half-raw meat, his eyes wandered on long green branch that had fallen near the fire and one thick end of which was actually in the flame. He noticed that because the wood was green and flexible, it did not burn. It was a phenomenon he had seen many times without real comprehension. Satiated, he put down the haunch and idly reached for the branch. The part that had been in the fire was partially charred and because it was split where the wind had detached it from an overhead tree, it was sort of pointed, not keenly like a flint knife but still pointed.

Musing, Gur pulled the striplings from the branch and found he had a pole a couple of hands longer than himself, as thick around at one end as three of his fingers, and with a hardened point at that end. It was not the first time he had

grasped a wooden staff.

His eyes fixed on the hardened end and something enormous happened in his mind. He was puzzled for a moment and he had to collect his thoughts. He thought and thought and the abstraction finally came through. He hefted the pointed stick.

It was as if he had a long, light usable flint knife, longer even than himself. He could stick an animal with this tool and still be away from the animal.

All these ideas did not come at once. Slowly they percolated through his mind—and then he heard it!

There was the sudden snapping of a twig and Gur froze. He glanced to the side where the sound had come from. He looked up. It was only Ka-La!

"Why are you here?" Gur asked contemptuously.

"I wanted to be with you, Gur. I wanted to talk with you. I..."

She stopped abruptly as Gur's eyes widened. She looked to the side and she saw what had attracted Gur's sight. At the third corner of the triangle which made the small clearing stood a huge saber-toothed tiger. Its eyes were on Ka-La and even in that glance Ka-La knew she was dead, for the animal's muscles tensed ever so slightly just before its leap.

Something also happened to Gur. Ordinarily he would have been in the low-hanging tree branches. He didn't know what impelled him to do it, but he shouted. "Ka-La!" he screamed hoarsely, "Ka-La!"

The tiger, its attention diverted, saw him, changed its position slightly and leaped.

Gur reacted, not instinctively, but in some way to forces unknown. He crouched, the fire-hardened stick grasped with all the strength he was capable of, its butt anchored against the ground. One huge razor-edge claw sent him spinning with a sweeping, cutting blow on his shoulder.

But Gur was not dead. Nor was Ka-La. Both of stared at the most unbelievable sight they'd ever seen. The tiger was standing on all fours and screaming madly infuriated cries of agony and rage. And right between the forelegs protruding clear through the animal, was Gur's hardened stick. Then with a shudder the tiger dropped to the ground—dead, sprawled in an inert heap.

And Ka-La was at Gur's side. Her hands busied themselves with his torn shoulder, but all he was doing was babbling incoherently about his "long knife". He looked to the crude spear and he looked back to Ka-La and she smiled. Gur would be her mate. Gur knew that too, for he smiled also. Gur was the Spearman of the Dawn...

THE END

PERCHANCE TO DREAM

By Sam Dewey

"WELL, THAT'S it," the port official said, stamping the last of the papers. "The manifest is clear, captain and you'll blast off tomorrow evening." He glanced at his watch. "Sorry to have kept you so long."

Captain John Brentwood got up and stretched. This paperwork was always tedious.

"Thank you," he said, "I think I'll have a look around town. It's been four years since I've been Terra-bound. I haven't seen New Denver since I was a good twelve years old."

The port official smiled. "I'm afraid you'll find things considerably changed, captain. Fortunately the government has cleaned up the roistering hells we used to have here." John looked puzzled at the sanctimonious simper that stretched across the man's face.

"Oh, I don't mean a man's pleasures have been stopped," he added. "Matter of fact, you'll enjoy yourself a great deal more. Would you like to recommend a good Euphoria?—or perhaps a Narco-Synthesis would appeal to you—all government controlled of course."

An expression of disgust went across John's face. "No thank you," he said brusquely, "I don't care for the induced pleasures—I'm not interested in drugs."

The port official shrugged. "As you wish," he said, the smile gone from his face, "but you'll find little else to do. The government wants its citizens to use the Euphoria. But you Colonials don't seem to understand."

"We're not a bunch of junkies," John said, and immediately regretted it. The port official's face was white.

"I could report you for that, Captain Brentwood," he said, "but I won't. Suppose you run along now. Let me give you a bit of advice. Euphoria are state institutions designed to provide citizens with pleasure without exposing them to sin—just remember that—you'll find no roistering dives. This isn't Venusberg, you know. Goodbye."

It was only nine o'clock, but already the streets were quiet. The famous "spacemen's Alley" was dead except for the huge fluorescent signs advertising the one single

red word "Euphoria!" John knew that the places were filled with people lying in cots soaking up the sythetic pleasures of visual imagery—so neat—so clean—so rotten! He was filled with disgust and for a moment he thought he'd turn around and go back to the ship. Thank God he didn't have to stay here any longer than a day.

Finally he came upon a small sign: "Food and Drinks." He noticed that "food" was the first word. They were really discouraging human discourse he thought wryly. John entered the bar and looked around.

"Whiskey and water," John said.

"You Terran?" the bartender asked guardedly. John shook his head.

"No, Venusian Colonial," he said.

The bartender said nothing but served the drink.

"Why ain't you in a Euphoria?" the bartender said curiously.

John grinned. "For the same reason you aren't. I'm not a junkie or a hop-head."

The bartender's face looked alarmed. "Hey, watch your language mister," he said. He withdrew from John and volunteered no further conversation. These people are really terrified, John thought.

John glanced around the room. No one—yes, there was a table occupied. In the far corner, a girl sat toying with the remnants of a meal. John took his glass and walked over to the table.

"Do you mind?" he said and sat down.

The girl looked up frightened. She saw his uniform and obviously recognized the Colonial markings.

"No, it's all right," she said listlessly. "I don't care."

John introduced himself and learned that the girl was Marcia Clayton; John ordered drinks for them. The girl was friendly and conversational. John commented on that, strange in *this* world.

"I can afford to be," she said wryly. She tossed a sheet of paper toward him. He picked it up and read.

"To Marcia Clayton (it said)—age 22—skill—computer. You will present yourself on (date) for personal arrest. The charge is failure to comply with the requirements of citizenship. Compliance with this order is imperative..." There was more, but John didn't need to read on.

"It's that bad now?" he asked.

"It's worse," she said. "I'd run, but there's no place to run to."

Just then the door opened and a man came in. He looked around the room and spotted the table at which John and Marcia were seated. He came over.

"Marcia Clayton?" he asked politely.

Marcia looked up and John saw terror in her eyes. "Yes," she whispered the color draining from her face.

"I have orders to ask you to accompany me to Section Three of Euphoria-Control. Please do this now."

He looked at the girl. "Marcia dear"—he emphasized the endearment—"—don't

(Cont'd On Page 125)



She held him aloft and roared with laughter

WOMAN'S WORLD

By

Ted Taine

There were a lot of things Damion didn't like about the planet; the moons were all wrong; the weather was very bad; and even the small women were over fifteen feet tall

THEY WALKED noiselessly through the forest, the two bright moons of Krinn filtering their light down through the interlaced branches of the trees. Damion didn't like the moons. They sat like two poached eggs against the blackness of space, and he had nurtured an aversion to poached eggs ever since childhood. The moon back on Earth was

different. It either resembled an orange slice and he definitely liked citrus fruits. He sighed deeply. Earth was a long way off.

An itch under one of his ribs reminded him that he didn't like the outlandish clothes, either. He glanced sideways at Konars, taking in his companion's dress. Konars was tall, with close-cropped blond hair that fitted

his skull like a yellow woolen cap. He was dressed in the tight-fitting breeches and tunic of the Krinnian, his broad shoulders straining against the coarse material. A short sword slapped against the muscle of his thigh as they padded over the fallen leaves. In his right hand, hanging at his side, he carried a heavy black case.

"You look damn silly," Damion said.

Konars' too-wide mouth curled upward in a boyish grin. "To tell you the truth, I feel silly."

Damion grunted, annoyed with the constant slapping of the sword against his own side; annoyed too by the itch of the tunic against his bare skin.

"This is a new way to induce membership, all right. Sink to the level of the barbarians."

"Infiltration," Konars said.

"I don't approve," Samion said flatly. "I didn't approve when I first heard of the plan, and I still don't. If these overgrown brats haven't the common sense to see that the Federation..."

"You'd better lower your voice," Konars warned.

Damion clamped his jaws shut tight. He was silent for a moment, then he said, "I don't see why we have to come down to their level. After all, the Federation..."

"We need Krinn in the Federation," Konars said simply.

"Why? It seems to be doing fine without..."

"You know why, Damion."

Damion fell silent, and the only sound was the gentle slap-slap of their sandals on the forest floor. After a while he said, "Forgive me, Konars." He clapped his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm just on edge, I guess. I always get this way before a big job. And this straight jacket doesn't help much, either. By Kudos, it itches!"

Konars glanced up at the twin moons. "We could do without those yellow eyes in the sky, too."

"Poached eggs."

"Huh?"

"They remind me...well, never mind." He swallowed his distaste, then shook his head sadly. "You'd think the other five planets in this system would make up their own minds."

"That's a little beyond them, Damion. You've got to remember that all these planets, with the exception of Daxo, are still roughly in Stage Two."

DAMON tugged uncomfortably at the tunic. "How can I forget it?"

"We'll just have to be uncomfortable for a little while," Konars said. "It'll be worth it if the plan works. If we can get Krinn to accept our offer, the other five will come scurrying into the Federation immediately."

Damion thought this over for a while. They were coming out of the forest now, and the dirt road was a little wider, still rutted with the deep scars of cartwheels.

"Want me to take the transmitter?" he asked.

Konars shifted the black case. "No, I can manage."

They walked on in silence, out in the open past the covering canopy of the woods now. The countryside was studded with colorful rock formations, luminous in the light of the twin moons. Even the shrubbery on either side of the road glowed with phosphorescent brilliance. It was a beautiful planet, all right, especially at night.

"The Lovely Lady—isn't that what they call it?" Damion asked.

Konars nodded, his eyes wandering over the twinkling rocks and plants around them. "All decked out in her best jewelry, too. I wonder if she was expecting visitors tonight."

"I doubt it." A new thought

crossed Damion's mind. "Do you suppose the copter...?"

"Sure. There wasn't a soul in sight when we landed, and the boys had plenty of time to get back to the ship."

Damion grinned in the darkness, pleased once again with Konars' faculty for understanding half-spoken thoughts. He supposed that came from having worked together for such a long time. How many planets had there been so far? By Kudos, he couldn't even count them all.

In the distance, like a sparkling tiara against the velvet night, the city crouched in flickering brilliance.

"We'll have to be splitting up soon," Konars said.

"Ummm."

"Do you want to run over it once more?"

"If you like."

Konars rubbed a broad palm over the flatness of his nose. "It isn't that I doubt your memory," he apologized, "but I like to make sure everything is detailed in my own mind."

"I know," Damion said. He had heard this same speech on a hundred separate occasions. It always preceded a precise resume of their operational plan. In the beginning, he had resented Konars' constant recapitulation. But over the years he had come to respect and admire the orderliness of the other man's mind.

Konars' mouth set thoughtfully, and his brows pulled slightly together, angling down over his grey eyes. When he spoke, his voice was soft.

"We'll bury the transmitter just outside the city. Your speaker is in working order, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Either one of us may have to make the necessary contact with our ships later." He paused, arranging the sequence of thoughts in his mind. "We'll part after we bury the trans-

mitter. You'll get into the palace somehow, I know; you've done this before, and I'll leave it to you."

"I don't know how I'm going to like working for these Amazons," Damion said.

"I understand they don't like references to their height. Perhaps you'd better keep that in mind."

Damion nodded, glad he'd been reminded, thankful again for the near-infallibility of Konars' thinking process.

"I'll get to work on the male inhabitants at once," Konars continued. "I don't expect results too soon, but let's plan on meeting tomorrow night anyway. If only to compare notes."

"Fine. I hope I'll be able to..."

"If you can't get away, which may be likely, I'll wait an hour and then go. I'll be there the next night at the same time. I'll keep coming every night until you *do* get away."

DAMION nodded briefly. "Let's synchro, shall we?"

They paused in the middle of the dirt road, the city much closer now, its lights brighter. The luminous dials of the chrono's, set into the Krinnian bracelets at their wrists, appeared suddenly as they snapped back the jewel-fronted case covers.

"Set at 2204," Damion said. He watched the sweep hand swing around past the numerals. "Ready...set." He heard a faint click as Konars engaged the gears again. Both men snapped the covers shut, transposing the timepieces into innocent-looking pieces of jewelry again. "What time shall we meet?"

"2300, I imagine. Or is that too late?"

"No, it should be all right."

"And where?"

"Do you recall the street map we saw?"

"Yes."

"Three squares from the palace, then. There should be an inn called *The Triple Door*. I'll meet you there."

"Fine."

Konars looked off into the distance. "We're getting pretty close, Damion. Let's bury this blamed thing."

They dug silently in the warm earth, leaving two short antennae exposed. These they covered with leaves.

"That should do it."

"Let's go."

The first few dwellings on the outskirts of the city were directly ahead of them now. Damion glanced at them briefly, then came to a halt at the same time Konars did. They clasped hands tightly.

"Good luck, Damion."

"And you." They released their grips and began walking in opposite directions; Damion into the city, Konars out over the fields. They hadn't gone five paces when both men turned simultaneously and whispered, "Be careful."

The thatched huts that fringed the city gave way slowly to heavier, more solid establishments. Damion walked up the dimly-lit road, wider now that it had entered the city proper. His eyes snapped quickly to the right and left as he made his way deeper into the city. There were shops now, and taverns, a smithy, a potter's kiln—all the signs of a culture in Stage Two. Well, perhaps this would be simpler than he thought.

He wondered about how he could gain access to the palace. Should he simply present himself and ask for a job? The advisability of this seemed dubious. The male of the Krinnian species wasn't particularly noted for its daring. It hardly seemed likely that one of them would have the courage to seek a job at the palace. Still, perhaps the very novelty of the approach would be in his favor.

The familiar sounds of a tavern crowd reached his ears, and he glanced up quickly. The yellow glow of the tavern spilled onto the road some fifty feet away, and from the sound of things, a bawdy drinkfest was in progress. He grinned, quickened his stride. The strains of a song picked at the air, grew louder as he came closer to the tavern.

"We'll polish your boots,
your lovely boots,

"We'll polish your belts
above 'em. .

"We'll cherish your curves,
your lovely curves,

"And dream of how we'll love 'em!"

DAMON was passing the tavern now, amused by the offkey croaking of the all-male chorus. He quickened his pace. It would be best to pass the tavern unnoticed.

A shrill whistle split the air, and Damion froze, a tremor of fear clutching at his back muscles. The song hung abruptly like the splintered remnants of a broken lance, and then crumbled into silence. He turned quickly at the sound of boots on the hard, crusted road. His hand went to his sword, more out of surprise than any thought of defense.

He had expected them to be big, yes. By all means, they should have been big.

But by Kudos, they were enormous! Damion stood six-five in his bare feet, but these women were twice his size and a little more. He stared in wonder at them, marvelling at their height.

He marvelled, too, at the perfection of the women. No gangling, awkward creatures were these. They were tall, yes, but they moved with quick animal grace within their loosely draped tunics. The cloth molded the supple strength of their bodies, falling liquid-

ly over full breasts, tapering down to narrow waists, flaring out again over rounded hips. They were splendidly bronzed by the sun, their long legs curving down into their polished boots.

They barged into the tavern now, shouting down the drunken men, their boots clattering on the rough wooden planking. Damion turned his back, began walking away. This was one brawl he didn't want to...

"You! You there!"

The voice was deep and husky, but not unfeminine. A tingle of apprehension worked its cold way up Damion's spine. He stretched his legs, lengthening his strides.

"You! Halt!"

He began to run, the sandals flapping loosely about his feet. He heard the stamp of heavy boots behind him, realized with sudden despair that he could never hope to outrun one of these elongated females.

An alley opened miraculously on his right, and he dashed into it. He skirted around an animal that looked like a cat, kept running, his breath jagged in his lungs.

"Steria, this way!" a voice shouted.

"What is it?" he heard the reply.

"Hurry up!"

He kept running, but the sounds behind him told him he would soon be captured. And suddenly, he felt a pair of strong arms about his middle. He was yanked rudely off his feet, the breath knocked out of him. He kicked out in fury, one of his sandals falling to the ground. He reached for his sword, felt a strong hand clamp onto his wrist.

She held him out in front of her, his feet dangling, his arms pinned to his sides. Her face was close to his, and he stared into the wide-spaced green eyes. Her lips were full and cushiony, and they parted now in a hearty laugh.

"A spry one, aren't you?" he asked.

"Put me down, damn it!"

SHE DROPPED him abruptly, and he landed solidly on the hard ground, the shock of contact jarring him to his teeth. He stood up, began dusting himself off.

"Very funny," he commented drily.

The girl kept laughing. She was joined quickly by a second girl who came running up the alley. Together, they towered over him, chuckling, their rich laughter spreading into every corner of the alley.

He put his hands on his hips, stared up at them.

"Well, now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?"

"Perky little one, isn't he?" the second girl said.

"Very frisky," the first one agreed.

He realized he wasn't behaving very much like a Krinnian male, but he didn't give a damn. Male resentment flared within him, resentment at being treated like...like a puppy dog.

"Alidia would like him," the first girl said.

"Who the hell's Alidia he blurted. He was angry now, very angry.

The girls thought this was funny. They slapped their shapely thighs and went off into gales of laughter.

"Alidia will *love* him," the second one said between chokes.

He began to sidestep as he saw the arms reaching for him again. He was too late. They lifted him off his feet, and he wriggled violently. He hit his captor with his fists, and the girl only laughed.

"To the palace with you, my friend," she said.

He stopped kicking. "The palace?"

"Alidia needs something to take her out of the doldrums. You should do very nicely."

"Oh," he said in a small voice. A

smile crossed his face. She was holding him in her arms like a baby now, clutched tightly against her.

She was slightly taller than the two who brought him to her. Her hair leaped about her flawless face like a cap of fire. The cold green of her eyes lashed out at him, her lips parted to show small cat's teeth.

"Do something funny," she said.

"What would you like me to do? Eat a snake? Cut off my right arm? Braid my hair and skip rope with it? Just..."

A smile crossed her face, and she covered it with her hand.

"He is funny, isn't he, Alidia?" one of the girls asked.

Alidia wiped the smile from her features. "He is only faintly amusing," she said. "He will have to do better than that, I'm afraid."

This time Alidia's smile was wider. Damion glowed with inner satisfaction. All he had to do was behave the way no other Krinnian man would dare to behave. They loved him for it, by Kudos. They loved him for his Terran impudence. And he was inside the palace! Most important of all, he was inside the palace, right where he wanted to be.

"What is your name?" Alidia asked.

"Just call me..." He stopped. He had been ready to say, "Shorty," but he remembered Konars' warning. "Just call me the first thing that comes to your mind."

"What would you suggest?"

"Well, how about a suitable name? Like 'Handsome,' or 'Hunk'...or just plain 'Zowie'?"

ALIDIA'S smile vanished, replaced by a narrow mouth with flaring green eyes. Oh-oh, he thought, the comedian has laid his first big egg.

"I find egotism to be an undesirable trait in Court Jesters," she said.

"I was only flattering your own taste," he said, tempering his pride with the kind of amusement he hoped they would like. "If you're too stupid to realize how excellent that taste is, then chop me up and serve me for breakfast."

The smile disappeared magically again, a beautiful expanse of white that made Alidia's face radiant. All he had to do was insult them, he thought. Insult them, and they'd split their sides laughing. Well, that should be easy enough.

He folded his arms across his wide chest. "I'm a busy man," he said. "Do I get the job or not?"

Alidia seemed to think heavily for a moment. "I shall call you 'Fool,'" she said at length.

"And I shall call you 'Idiot.'"

The girls behind Damion snickered, and he waited for the response from Alidia. She smiled at him. "Do not press me too far, Fool."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm hungry. When do we eat?"

This time Alidia laughed out loud. "Your humor has an inconsistent absurdity to it, but it is fresh. You may stay, Fool."

"Good," he said. "In fact, I've already unpacked."

HE WAITED for the laughs, pleased when he got them. He was convinced now that he'd missed his calling. By Kudos, stereoshow comedians lived luxuriantly back on Earth.

"Show the Fool his quarters," Alidia said. "And then feed him."

She turned regally, the curve of her back shimmering beneath her tunic. He watched the sway of her hips, the gentle taper of her legs. And then she was gone. He turned to the two giggling girls behind him, spread his palms wide.

"Now who do you suppose she was?" he asked, shrugging.

This really broke the girls up. They hugged each other and laughed uproariously. "The Queen..." they choked. "He asks who... the Queen... is."

They led him from the chamber, still laughing.

He was wakened before the sun rose.

"Fool!" a female voice shouted.

He swung his legs over the side of his cot. "What in holy hell..." he began. He remembered suddenly where he was, slumped back against the stone wall and rubbed his eyes. The girl towering over him had long black hair, a saucy nose liberally sprinkled with freckles, and warm brown eyes.

"Good morning, Fool," she said pertly.

He yawned. "What's so good about it?" He wasn't trying to be funny, but she laughed anyway.

"Did you sleep well, Fool?"

"Are all your mattresses stuffed with rocks?" he inquired. Again, he was simply inquiring about a prevailing condition, but she seemed to think he was making a big joke. He shrugged. Oh well, the life of a jester. He looked out the small open window.

"Why, it's still night!" he said in surprise.

"The sun will be up soon," the girl said.

"How soon?" he asked drily.

She giggled. "Soon."

He stood up, his eyes travelling over the girl's body. "You're cute. What's your name?"

"Thania."

"Glad to know you." He paused. "Well, what now?"

"Your breakfast. You will eat in the kitchen. Alidia will want you to amuse her later while she breakfasts."

"Mind if I wash first?"

"You'd best hurry," she said. "Alidia rises early."

"Not as early as I do, I'll bet," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing. All fools talk to themselves. It's an occupational disease."

"Oh."

THE COOK'S speciality was poached eggs.

Damion stared down at them, his mouth suddenly dry. He looked at them with careful scrutiny, lifting them gingerly with the end of his wooden fork, peered under them as if he were looking for dirt under a rug. For a brief ecstatic moment he thought enviously of Konars out in the fields with the men of Krinn. Was Konars awake at this ungodly hour? Was Konars eating poached eggs? He put down his fork with finality. Well, neither was Damion!

"Cook!" he bellowed.

The cook was as tall as all the other women he'd seen, and her width tried hard to rival her height. She turned surprised blue eyes on him, a spatula in her pudgy hand.

"What kind of garbage is this?" he asked.

The cook giggled.

"I'm a working man, whether you realize it or not. Now get these two soulful eyes off my plate and give me something to eat."

The cook waddled over good-naturedly, slapped him on the back with a hand like a meat cleaver. He yanked back his face an instant before it collided with the poached eggs. The cook took them away and brought back some scrambled ones. Thankfully, hungrily, he attacked them with ferocious intensity.

He was just scraping his platé clean when Thania came into the kitchen.

"Alidia is ready for you, Fool."

Damion patted his stomach. "And I," he said, "am ready for Alidia."

He followed Thania through a long stone corridor. A high wooden door was set in the far wall. Thania threw the door open, waited for him to enter, then closed it behind him.

His eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight streaming through the tall windows. Alidia sat at a small table near one of the windows. She wore a green silk dressing gown, falling past her knees to cascade onto the stone floor in rolling waves. When she heard the door close, she looked up.

"Good morning, Fool," she said.

He wondered about the advisability of the what's-so-good-about-it gag again, decided quickly against it. "Good morning."

Alidia patted a stool by her side. "Come sit near me, Fool."

He crossed the room, surveyed the high stool, struggled onto it with some difficulty.

Alidia's eyes were smiling at his labors. He finally made himself comfortable, looped his toes under the top rung, and sat watching her while she ate.

"No sparkling witticisms this morning, Fool?"

"Do you expect a gem everytime I open my mouth?" He didn't like the way she put him on the defensive. It would be very easy to keep on insulting her. In fact, he would enjoy it immensely.

Alidia didn't answer him. She drank a deep draught of milk from a tall glass, put it back on the table.

"What is your real name?" she asked. Her face was serious, and he was suspicious of her changed mood.

"Fool," he said.

"This is not your real name." Her eyes had narrowed, and he found himself watching the strange intensity in them. Her lower lip, he noticed was full and petulant, like that of a pouting child. He wondered what it would

be like to kiss one of these overgrown. . . he caught his thought abruptly. There was work to be done.

"No," he said, "Fool is not my real name."

"What is your real name?"

"Fool," he said.

Her hand flashed out with amazing speed. It caught him on the side of his jaw, sent him sprawling backwards. He grabbed at the air, felt himself toppling off the stool. His shoulders crashed against the stone floor, the stool clattering noisily. He got to his feet with dignity, stared up into her cold face. There was no sympathy on that face, no remorse. He could feel the sting of her open palm on his cheek. He worked his jaw, felt the grit of a chipped tooth.

"Where are you wrestling tonight?" he asked. There was no humor in his voice.

"I asked you a question. Answer me."

"My real name is Ichthor van Scrubolo der Paxley Thorpe the Second." His lips had formed into a tight line, and he kept his teeth together behind them.

HE SAW the beginnings of the smile on her face, and decided to press his luck. "But my friends call me Fool," he added.

"Sit down, Fool," she said.

"Thanks, I'll stand. I don't like getting knocked down."

She turned back to her breakfast with a shrug. "You have many dislikes for a man."

"How many men do you know?"

She glanced up, returned to her cereal. "Not very many."

"Then how would you know about my dislikes, or likes for that matter?"

"You talk like a Federation representative," she said.

He looked at her quickly, afraid

she'd pierced his disguise. She was bent over her cereal, nonchalantly lifting the wooden spoon to her mouth.

"How do they talk?" he asked.

"Stupidly. The way you do."

"Ask a foolish question," he said.

"They think we need them."

"Maybe you *do*."

"Hardly. Krinn is an old planet. We've managed nicely without the Federation for a good many centuries."

He wondered how far he should go with this discussion. Well, just a little farther anyway. "There are a great many planets in the Federation, aren't there?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes. A foolish setup, though. They would teach us to reach the stars." She put another spoonful of food in her mouth, and he watched her lips close about it. "But who wants to reach the stars?"

"Some people do."

"Do you?"

He was about to answer when he caught his tongue. "I am only a poor fool," he said.

"Have you ever heard of the system containing Earth, Mars, Venus, Jupiter..."

"Jupiter," he corrected.

She opened her eyes wide. "You have heard of the system then?"

"A fool hears many things."

"Well; the Federation was started in that system. Since then they've expanded, of course. But Krinn will never join them. Never."

"Why not?"

"We don't need them."

Well, he thought, this is where I came in.

"Space travel is a dangerous thing," she went on. "Our neighbors on Daxo have mastered the science. They visit us often, and they've offered to teach us all they know. We have refused every time."

"For the love of Kudos, why?" He glanced at her quickly, wondering if she'd noticed his use of the Terran expression. Apparently, she hadn't.

"Krinn is a happy planet. We intend to keep it that way."

"What way?"

"The way it is. In a happy state."

"In a medieval state, you mean."

She paused, the spoon halfway to her mouth. "What kind of a state?"

He realized the expression was foreign to her, rephrased it. "A blind, ignorant, groping state."

She put down her spoon. "My Fool is looking for another cuff on the jaw."

"Go on," he said steadily, "cuff away. You can't slug every man on the planet."

Her fingers clenched at her side, and he waited patiently, expecting the blow at any moment. Finally, her hand relaxed, and she resumed eating. She said nothing more until she had finished her meal. Then she turned to Damion and said, "You're not very funny this morning, Fool. I suggest you go to the kitchen and see if the cook has any pots you might clean."

"I thought..."

"Go now, Fool."

Damion nodded, a brief single nod accompanied by tight lips and flaring eyes. Then he turned and left Alidia, the sun flaming in her auburn hair.

KONARS SNAPPED the case shut on his wrist chron. It was 0900. He cursed himself inwardly for having got such a late start, cursing the comfort and warmth of the haystack. Well, it merely indicated that he'd needed the sleep badly, and he certainly wasn't going to waste more time mourning over a few lost hours.

He pulled his tunic tight beneath his belt. Damn, these clothes did itch. His mind wandered to Damion, and he wondered whether he'd succeeded in

getting into the palace. Most likely he had. He smiled as he remembered a time on Saranna, when Damion had disguised himself as a peddler, got into the Governor's home, and been invited to stay for a week. Yes, Damion was probably in the arms of a lovely Amazon by this time, gathering all the information the Federation would need.

Konars shrugged. There was work to be done. Quickly, he started across the fields, pausing once to examine the curious plants that covered the ground. By day, they were plain, almost ugly. Krinn was a planet of the night, he thought. The idea did not surprise him. Night was a woman's time, and Krinn was a woman's planet. No, the idea did not surprise him at all.

He made his way across the field, heading toward a small, thatched cottage squat against the horizon. A curl of smoke pushed its way out of the square stone chimney at one end of the cottage. Behind the cottage, the sky was a pale blue wash. There was a serenity to the scene that stirred memories of Earth. He tried to place the picture. France? Germany?

England. Yes, England.

He pushed these thoughts aside, remembering the work ahead of him, envying Damion his soft job for a moment. He walked up the path leading to the cottage, paused outside the enormous door set in its face. He lifted a brass knocker, let it fall heavily.

"Just a moment," a voice called.

He waited impatiently, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. At last, the door opened a crack. A pair of narrow blue eyes studied his face. A long nose stuck out, seemed to sniff him audibly.

"Yes?" the voice asked.

"I'm a traveler," he said. "I'm lost."

The eyes kept studying him, the door not budging. "A traveler from where?"

Konars met the other man's eyes squarely. "From the North. I come South in search of work."

"Mmm?"

"Yes." Konars shifted his weight again. "Is your woman at home?"

"No." The voice seemed to lose some of its suspicion.

"May I come in?"

"I suppose so." The door opened wide, and Konars stepped into the cool, dim interior of the cottage. His eyes swept the room, touching on the two-level table, the short chairs and the tall chairs, the double set of steps built side by side. A difficult situation on this planet, all right. He wondered why the women were so big. Glands, activated by elements in the air? Or the drinking water? Metabolism? Perhaps the Federation could help eventually. Selective breeding, perhaps or... He gave it up. He was no scientist. He knew, though, that the Federation would conceive some method of putting the planet on a more normal level. If Krinn joined the Federation.

The little man was studying Konars closely.

"Get you something to eat?" he asked.

"Just a drink of water," Konars said. "And a place to sit."

HE WALKED over to a two-level bench near the fireplace, one level low to accommodate the male, the other high for the female's benefit. He sat down on the lower level, stretched his legs. The little man poured water from a wooden bucket into a mug.

"Wife working?" Konars asked.

"Yes."

"In the city?"

"Yes." The little man brought the mug to Konars, and he drained it greedily.

"Ahhhh. Good."

The little man kept watching him,

waiting for him to speak, it seemed. "My name is Konars." He extended his hand.

"Partin." He took Konars' hand and held it firmly. When he released it, he sat on a stool across from Konars, the waiting look still in his eyes. Konars squirmed uncomfortably.

"Like the idea of your wife working, Partin?"

Partin waited a moment before he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Just like that." Konars leaned forward expectantly.

"No, I don't like it. Men should do the work."

"Mmmm?"

"Of course," Partin spat. "Or are you a damn reactionary?"

"No. Hardly."

"I'm not sure about you, friend."

"What is there to be sure about?"

"I'm just not sure, that's all."

Konars leaned forward, and his voice lowered to a confidential whisper. "We can do something about it, perhaps."

"About what? About my not being sure?"

Konars shook his head impatiently. "The women. We can do something about them."

Partin smiled. "Really?"

"There are more like us, my friend.

A great many more. If we..."

"Unite?"

"Yes," Konars said, his voice bearing a note of surprise. This was running too smoothly. He had the uneasy feeling that something was wrong.

Partin was nodding now, his eyes bright. "I know," he said. "I know."

"I've been talking to others," Konars lied.

"They feel the same way we do." It was a statement, not a question.

Konars leaned back, his eyes narrowing. "Yes, yes they do." He had expected fear. Revolt should have been a frightening prospect to the average

Krinnian male. He should have had a tough selling job, but instead...

"I'd like to keep in touch with you, my friend. I'll be circulating, moving around. When we're strong enough..."

"We'll strike!" Partin slammed his bunched fist into the palm of his open hand. "The government will be ours." His eyes gleamed brightly. "And then things will change."

Konars stood up. A vagrant thought crossed his mind, and he considered it seriously. Was it possible that the first Krinnian he'd contacted was a hopeless idiot? He pushed this thought aside. No, no, that was impossible. The man seemed rational enough. Was it possible, then, that revolt had been seething in the Krinnian mind for a long time now?

IF SO, HIS job would be an extremely easy one. He had expected a long, hard pull. If this Krinnian were typical, all he had to do was apply the spark to the waiting tinder.

"Well," he said, "thanks for the water." He began walking toward the door. Partin put his hand on Konars' arm.

"Will it be soon, friend?" he asked.

Konars nodded. "Much sooner than we expected."

"And I'll be notified?"

"Yes, of course. We'll...we'll arrange a signal." For the first time in his life, Konars was visibly confused.

"I'll be waiting," Partin said.

"Fine, fine." He stepped out into the sunlight, blinking his eyes against the glare. Down the road, he saw the outlines of another cottage. He turned, waved at the little man in the doorway, and started off to meet his second Krinnian.

Thoughts crossed his mind with blinding rapidity. He shrugged, refusing to speculate. Maybe it would be easy. He wondered if Damion had

gathered any information that might be helpful.

And then he thought of Damion in the arms of a big woman, and he shook his head in envy as he approached the second cottage.

Damion dug down deep into the black bowels of the pot. The pot was sticky and gritty and greasy and just plain damn ordinary filthy.

Damn barbarians, he thought. Stupid ignorant louts.

He poked at the hardened residue with the scraper in his right hand. Back on Earth, this pot could be cleaned in a matter of seconds with a simple disfec bath. Better yet, it would be thrown out and replaced by a new plastonite one that wouldn't collect garbage the way this one did.

Krinn is a happy planet, she had said. Happy for whom, he wondered? Sure, imbeciles are happy, too. Imbeciles might even enjoy scraping the guts out of this damn filthy pot. Well, he was not an imbecile!

He straightened abruptly, almost banging his head on the edge of the enormous pot. He threw the scraper into the rounded depths, heard it clank metalically against the sides. He rubbed the filth of his hands onto the grime-smeared apron they'd given him, then ripped the apron off, rolled it into a ball, and threw that into the pot, too.

"I quit!" he bellowed.

The cook giggled and waddled over to him. "You quit?" she asked.

"You heard me, Cookie. I was hired as a funnyman, not a chimney sweep."

A short spurt of laughter erupted from the cook's lips. "You *are* a funny man," she said.

"I'm glad someone appreciates my talents," Damion said. "Where's Alidia?"

"She..."

"Never mind. I'll find her myself."

The cook's face lost its humor. "Just a minute," she said.

Damion ran for the door, the cook's weight in his favor. He yanked it open, darted into the stone corridor, kept running until he reached the door at the end of the hallway. Behind him, he heard the cook puffing and panting.

He burst into Alidia's chambers, slammed the door behind him and leaned against it. Alidia was seated on a low couch at the other end of the room, and a strange man in bright scarlet sat next to her, his feet barely touching the floor.

"I'm afraid your cook is after me," Damion panted.

ALIDIA STIFLED a laugh. "Come here, Fool," she said, beckoning him to her with one slender, graceful hand.

He crossed the room, looking back nervously at the door, expecting it to be shoved open at any moment. Alidia reached out and picked him up, perching him on her bare knee. The touch of her hands sent a strange tremor up his back. He was aware suddenly of the scent of her, strong and sweet.

The door was pushed in violently, and the cook shoved her tremendous girth into the room. "Your majesty," she panted, "forgive me, forgive me. He—he—"

"That's all right, Corette," Alidia said. "You may go. I'll take care of the Fool." She chuckled Damion under the chin and asked playfully, "Won't I. Fool?"

The cook shrugged massive shoulders and left the room. Damion stared at the man sitting next to Alidia on the couch. He was broad shouldered, with an angular face that terminated in a short beard beneath his chin.

"Bendir," she said, "you haven't met my Fool, have you?" She leaned clos-

er to Damion and he felt the gentle insistence of her breasts against his shoulder. "Say hello to Commander Bendir, little Fool."

"Hello," Damion said gruffly.

"That's a good Fool," Alidia said. She put her lips to his cheek, brushed them softly against his skin. He felt a blush start somewhere around his toes, work its way up to his face. Alidia laughed a merry little laugh and cradled his face in her hand. "My Fool blushes, poor Fool. Have you never been kissed by a queen, Fool?"

"Only by Empresses," Damion said.

Bendir stood up abruptly, his polished boots clacking against the stone floor. He began to pace impatiently.

"Really, Alidia," he said, "must we waste time with such nonsense."

Damion noticed that his nose wiggled whenever he moved his mouth. His beard wiggled, too. He stared into the brown depths of the other man's eyes, decided to use his jester's license once again.

"Who is this jerk?" he asked.

Bendir's head snapped around quickly, and his hand dropped to his belt. A holster hanging there seemed to unsnap of its own accord, and a weapon flicked up into Bendir's hand. Damion felt the fingers of fear stroking his back again. Why hadn't he seen that before? Electronic, all right, something like a Terran blaster he would guess. Well, he'd played his cards and his bluff had been called. Should he turn tail and snuggle up close to Alidia's protective skirts? Or should he stand up like the man he was and get burned to a cinder in about three seconds flat?

The prospect of becoming a pile of ashes didn't appeal to him. Neither did the thought of a woman's protection. He wished for a moment that he possessed Konars' sharp mind. Konars could talk his way out of anything. Well, there was no time like the pre-

sent to start learning. He got to his feet, sliding off Alidia's lap.

"A foreigner, I see."

Bendir held the weapon steady, his eyes searing deep into Damion's.

"What's that in your hand," Damion asked, "a silver salami?"

BENDIR'S EYES were still uncompromising. Damion held his ground. He'd come this far, so he might as well go all the way.

"Well, come on, friend. Do something."

He waited, saw the tightening of Bendir's jaw muscles. He'd pressed it too far. In a second, a yellow lance would shoot out of the muzzle of Bendir's weapon. Goodbye, Damion. Period. The End.

"Bendir!" It was Alidia's voice, and it sliced through the charged atmosphere like a sharp icicle. "Put that away this instant." Damion, somehow, resented the intrusion.

Bendir hesitated.

"Need I remind you that you are my guest?" She glanced quickly at Damion. "Besides, he is only a Fool."

Reluctantly, Bendir holstered the weapon. "You should teach him better manners." He looked at Damion with unveiled derision. "On a man's planet, he would be dead now."

Like hell, Damion thought. On a man's planet I'd take you outside and make you eat that cruddy beard.

"This is a woman's planet," Alidia reminded Bendir. "Despite efforts to the contrary," she added pointedly.

Bendir seemed to forget his anger immediately. "Are they still pestering you?" he asked, shaking his head sadly.

"The last representative was here only last week. Didn't they come to Daxo, too?"

Bendir smiled. "Of course. They're after all of us."

So this idiot was from Daxo. Damion understood the electronic weapon now. Hadn't Alidia said that the Daxonians had mastered space travel?

Bendir spread his palms wide. "The Federation will never give up, Alidia. I was thinking, however, that you might..." He stopped speaking, his eyes flicking Damion meaningfully.

"He's all right," Alidia said. "He is only a Fool."

Bendir smiled knowingly. "No man is a fool, Alidia. Send him away."

Alidia shrugged lightly. "I'm sorry, Fool. Go to your quarters. I'll send for you later."

"Sure," Damion said. "Suits me fine. I could use a little sleep." He turned to face the Daxonian. "Goodbye, Bendir, dear," he said.

He saw the faint flick of Bendir's wrist toward the holster again, deliberately turned his back on him. He heard Bendir sputter. He was almost at the door when he remembered something.

"Alidia?"

"Yes."

"I hate to ask..."

"What is it, Fool?"

"I'd like a little time off. Tonight. At about..." He wondered whether 2300 would have any meaning to her. "Well, late tonight," he finished.

"I'm sorry, Fool. I prefer you to stay in the palace."

"What? That's absurd..."

"You may go now, Fool."

"A man is entitled to a little—"

"That's enough, Fool." She smiled wickedly. "You wouldn't want me to turn Bendir loose, would you?"

Damion pulled back his hands in mock fright. "Oh goodness no," he squealed. "Great big Bendir is liable to kill me and drink my blood." His voice lowered to its normal deep tones again, and he stared at Bendir mali-

ciously. "Wouldn't you, strong boy?"

BENDIR SAID nothing, his fingers twitching nervously near his weapon.

Damion shrugged. "No? All right." He turned to go again.

"Someday, Fool," Bendir said. "Someday."

"Sure," Damion answered. Gently, he closed the door behind him.

He cut the rich tapestry into long shreds, the knife he'd stolen from the kitchen moving swiftly in his hand. He paused for a moment and snapped open the lid of his wrist chron. It was 2240. He had twenty minutes.

Quickly, he knotted the long strips together, then tied a loop on one end. He flipped this over the post on the end of his cot, moved the cot to the open stone window, and tossed the make-shift rope down to the ground below. He looked out after the rope, saw no sentries, and quickly made his descent.

Konars would be waiting. He'd have to hurry.

He left the rope dangling against the wall of the palace, hoping it wouldn't be spotted before he returned. Quietly, he made his way through the heavily-planted grounds. The trees and bushes twinkled with a thousand luminous eyes, and overhead the stars winked back flirtingly. The rocks beneath his feet glowed with inner beauty, lending a fairyland enchantment to the setting. The beauty of the planet struck him like a physical blow. It was like a land of eternal springtime, the air balmy and caressing. He breathed deeply of the night, his heart singing within him.

He counted off the squares as he walked. Each square was approximately a hundred yards long. The squares stretched out from the palace on eith-

er side, no houses or shops occupying the first two squares in any direction from the royal dwelling. For a moment, he wondered if he were walking in the right direction. And then, at the end of the third square, he saw the warm glow of the inn.

A grillwork sign creaked back and forth on heavy iron hinges outside the inn. *The Triple Door*. He smiled, glanced quickly at his watch. 2304. He snapped the case shut, opened the first door he came to, noticing that two others were directly beyond it.

There were all the familiar sounds of any inn anywhere. The crackle of the fire, the muted hum of conversation, the occasional outburst of laughter, the swish of beverage against the side of a mug, the snatches of song. He wished he could get drunk, by Kudos. He wished he could get roaring drunk and forget all about Alidia, and Krinn, and the Federation. Everything. He sighed deeply, his eyes searching the room for Konars.

If he knew Konars, the table he'd chosen would be far from the door, most likely in a dark corner where recognition would be a narrow possibility. His eyes probed the corners of the room, widened slightly when he saw Konars with his back to the wall, leaning over a tankard.

He crossed the room quickly, stopped before Konars' table.

"Mind if I sit here, friend?" he asked.

"Make yourself at home," Konars said, his voice loud. It dropped to a sudden whisper and he said, "It's good to see you, Damion."

They clasped hands firmly beneath the table. "And you, Konars. Kudos, these women are insufferable."

KONARS EXPRESSED surprise. "I never thought I'd hear you say

that about *any* woman."

"They're pretty, mind you," Damion amended.

"Mmmm."

"And intelligent."

"Mmmm."

"But..."

"But what?"

"Well..." Damion nibbled at his lower lip. "Tell me," he said suddenly, changing the subject, "how has it been going?"

"Incredibly well."

"Really? Tell me."

"It's difficult to analyze, really. I'm not sure I understand it myself."

"What—for the love of..."

"You know the plan, of course. I thought it would naturally meet with some resistance. Instead, I find the men ready, willing, and able to revolt."

"How do you mean?"

"I contacted a great many of them today. I got a late start," he apologized, "but I really accomplished a lot once I got going. Without exception, the men treated me like a long-lost brother. The concept of revolt was not at all new to them. In fact, it seems to be planted firmly in their minds. You won't believe this, Damion, but I've already arranged a meeting for tonight."

Damion's features showed his disbelief.

"I know, I know," Konars said hastily, "it sounds impossible. We hadn't expected to reach that stage for several weeks. But I tell you there was nothing to do. It was as if they expected me." He paused. "Do you know what I mean, Damion?"

Damion thought for several moments. "Can it be the Federation was wrong?"

"I doubt it," Konars answered quickly.

"I'm worried, Konars. It smells fishy. Perhaps we'd best abandon the plan. Or at least..."

"The plan is a perfectly workable one. The Old Man may make mistakes sometimes, but this isn't one of them. This is one time he's really given a problem all the thought it deserved—and he's come up with a perfect solution."

Damion still looked doubtful, Konars leaned across the table, his voice dropping lower. "Figure it out for yourself, Damion. Suppose you were confronted with a planet like Krinn, Stage Two, refusing to accept Federation membership...and on the insane grounds that they don't need us. What would you do?"

Damion shook his head. "I don't know."

"You'd do just what the Old Man decided to do. You'd find some way to show these Krinnians that they really *do* need us."

All the old doubts began flooding Damion's mind again. "All right," he whispered. "Even assuming that starting a revolt among the men was the best solution, although we both know open intervention is a breach of Federation precedent..."

"Five planets will join the Federation if we get Krinn," Konars interrupted. "We can afford to break precedent."

Damion nodded. "I'll go along that far, too. And I'll grant that a timely end to the revolt by Federation troops would undoubtedly show these elongated females how much they really need us. That much I'll grant."

KONARS SMILED. "If you'll go that far, there's not much farther to go, Damion. Once we've made contact with our ships, and once our troops put an end to the revolt we

fomented..."

He spread his hands wide, shrugging.

Damion shook his head violently. "That's not what's bothering me. In the light of what you've told me, there may be deeper implications."

"Like what?"

"Like a male populace that's been straining at the leash for a good many centuries now. Like this same populace sweeping forward on the drunkenness of rebellion. Like a real fight on the Federation's hands, instead of the token show of arms we'd planned..."

"Whoa, slow down!"

"Like a real breaking of precedent in that the Federation will actually be taking the planet by force." Damion shook his head again. "No sir, Konars, it stinks."

Konars made an open-handed gesture of uncertainty. "Maybe you're right."

"If I am, it'll be too damned bad for the Federation, I'll tell you that much."

"How much time do you have, Damion?"

"Hub?"

"When do you have to be back at the palace?" He grinned. "You did get into the palace, didn't you?"

"Sure. I'm number one jester and bottle washer." Damion grimaced.

"Have you a little time yet?"

"They don't even know I'm gone. As far as I'm concerned, I've got all night."

"Good. I want you to come to the meeting with me. I'll let you form your own judgements."

Damion nodded slowly. "I'd like that. I'd like that a lot."

"We'd better get started then. It's almost time."

The meeting was held in the musty wine cellar of a man named Garrid. His wife was a silk merchant, and tre-

mendous yardage of the material she sold was wrapped about the bulging middle of his body. He greeted them secretly at the door, bidding them enter after Konars had identified himself.

"Come in, come in," he whispered, nodding his head, his chins shaking with each vigorous vibration. "The meeting has already started."

Damion's eyes swept the room. The men were seated among the big wine barrels, spraddling stools, benches, perched on upended barrels. The fire of rebellion was in their eyes, and Damion regarded them uneasily.

A bearded man, more heavily built than the others, was standing on top of a wine barrel, his hand resting upon the short sword at his side.

"What have they given us?" the bearded man asked. He paused dramatically, then shouted, "Nothing! That's what."

Damion nudged Konars. "I thought you were running this show," he whispered.

"I guess we're a little late," Konars replied.

They took seats among the men as the bearded speaker continued. "Are we to be kept slaves forever?" he asked.

A discontented grumbling started among the men.

"We are men," the speaker belted, "men!" He lowered his voice. "Does anyone here know the meaning of the word?"

AGAIN THE grumbling rolled through the crowded cellar.

"No! And I'll tell you why. We don't know what it means because we've never had the opportunity to be men. What kind of men sit home while their women go out to labor? What kind of men are subject to the arbitrary whims of a female ruler? These

are not men! These are puppets with skirts!"

Damion leaned forward, hypnotized by the man's speaking power. "He's good," he said to Konars.

"Too good."

"Puppets with skirts," he repeated. "And the puppet masters stand high above us, pulling the strings, watching us do our delightful little dance." His voice dropped to an ominous whisper. "Well, gentlemen, the time has come to break those strings."

A shout went up from the men, and the speaker suddenly flared with new fire.

"Break the strings and make the puppet masters dance to *our* tune!" he roared. "We'll play the fiddle from now on, and they'll dance because we'll tell them to! They'll dance...and they'll like it!"

"Make 'em dance," a short, balding man shouted.

"Show 'em what men really are!"

"We've had enough of them."

"Time we had a change around here."

Beside Damion, Garrid the silk merchant stirred uneasily. His plump fingers went to his lips, and a worried look tip-toed across his face.

"Soon," the speaker shouted. "Soon we'll be ready! And when we're ready, we'll strike. Strike!"

"Strike!" the men shouted in unison. "Strike, strike! Strike!"

"Oh dear," Garrid said. "They're getting a little too loud, aren't they?" The frown had deepened, and he bit his lip nervously.

"Sounds something like a baseball game," Konars commented wryly.

Damion's face was serious. "It sounds like a hell of a lot more than that. These guys are really out for..."

A familiar whistle shrieked through the wine cellar. Garrid leaped to his feet, the fat quivering on his belly as

he rose.

"The Guard," he said. "Oh my goodness, the Guard."

Damion was up instantly. "I know that whistle, Konars. The gals are coming, and I suggest we get the hell out of here."

There was a loud battering on the front door, followed by the sound of splintering wood. Damion saw the buckle inward, saw the shining boots and the long, curving legs as the women crashed through and charged down the steps.

"Take them!" the bearded man shouted. "Don't let them bring this news back to..."

The flat side of a sword cut his ranting short. He toppled off the wine barrel and a tall, bronzed woman picked him up quickly and flicked him into a corner. Damion saw swords scraping free of their scabbards, saw the women burst into the crowded room like a jet explosion.

And then all hell broke loose.

The men were shouting, hacking at the women with their short, ineffective swords. The women ploughed into them like enormous scythes, knocking them aside with powerful sweeps of their arms. A sword sliced into a wine barrel, and a stave splintered, releasing a flow of red liquid onto the floor.

"We'd better get out fast," Damion said.

KONARS AGREED. They pushed their way toward the door, shoving past the slipping, sliding, writhing men and women.

They were halfway up the steps, the sound of battle below them now, when a powerful pair of arms wrapped themselves around Damion's waist. He half-turned, still in the woman's grip. He drew his arm back, then uncorked a right that landed solidly on the point

of her jaw. He felt her grip loosen, brought up a sudden left hook. Her arms dropped to her sides, and she stumbled backward down the stairs.

Konars had already opened the door.

"This way," he whispered urgently.

Below him, Damion could hear Garrid pleading, "My wine, be careful. Please, my wine."

He smiled and followed Konars into the darkness. The wind was fresh on his face, and it was a pleasant change from the sweating, musty atmosphere of the cellar.

"Look out!" Konars shouted.

Damion whirled rapidly, just in time to see the big fist swinging up toward his face. He tried to duck his head, felt the hard knuckles crunch against his eye. A blazing spurt of pain erupted inside his head, and he thought for an instant that she'd blinded him. He cursed himself for not realizing that they'd have left someone outside. He was annoyed because his nose was beginning to run, and his eye was tearing, and he couldn't see where she was. How could he hit her if he couldn't see her?

He heard a scuffle, heard Konars' deep voice swearing softly. There was the solid thud of metal against bone, and then the crumbling noise of a body hitting the ground.

A hand grasped his. "Come on, boy. Let's make tracks."

He tried to smile, and the pain shot clear up to his eye, threatening to turn his head inside out. They ran, with the wind cool against his face. After a while, he opened his good eye, saw that Konars was leading him back to the palace.

The eye that had been hit refused to open. He stopped trying.

"How'd you get out of the palace?" Konars asked.

"Rope. My window."

They kept running, and the pain was spreading to his cheek now, making the entire left side of his face numb. Kudos, she could hit!

"Which side of the palace?"

"North. No, South."

He saw Konars nod. The trees thickened, and he knew they had entered the palace grounds. Around him the trees and rocks and stars all twinkled, but he couldn't distinguish them from the galaxy of blinding lights that was swimming before his eyes.

"I can find my way from here," he said.

Konars stopped, and the two men breathed heavily in the darkness for several moments.

After a while, Konars asked, "What did you think of it?"

"Just what I said before. It stinks."

Konars nodded agreement. "Give me another day, Damion. I want more time to scout around. In the meantime, keep your ears open. This little brawl tonight will certainly be talked about in there." He gestured toward the palace.

"You'd better go," Damion said.

"If we feel the same way tomorrow night," Konars said, "we'll transmit to the ships and explain the situation. I think this calls for further instructions from the Old Man, don't you?"

"Maybe. We'll see. Go now, will you? Before they have you cleaning pots, too."

KONARS' FACE was concerned.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Get the hell out of here, will you?"

"I'll see you tomorrow night." Konars clapped Damion on the shoulder. He ducked low and disappeared in the bushes.

Damion waited until he could no longer hear Konars' footfalls. He ran across the grounds then, keeping to

the shadows, hugging the old stone walls.

Overhead, the twin moons glared down like a pair of poached eggs.

Damion found the rope, just the way he left it. Not a soul was in sight. He stuck his tongue out at the moons, and climbed quickly to his room.

He was certain that someone had stuffed an old meteorite into his mouth while he slept. He felt the strong fingers on his shoulder shaking him to awareness. The meteorite in his mouth was a very, very old one, and it tasted of ash and other things.

He sat up in bed, yawned. A pain stabbed at the side of his face, and he touched his eye gingerly.

"What happened to *you*?"

He recognized Thania's voice, squinted up at the freckled giantess.

"I dreamt I walked into a door," he said.

"That was some dream."

"That was some door, sister."

He touched the eye again. It felt like a pound of ground hamburger. It probably had maggots, too.

"If you want breakfast, you'd better hurry," Thania said.

"Sure. Hurry, hurry, hurry."

Everyone commented on his eye. It seemed to be the choicest bit of news to hit the palace in weeks. He was not surprised when Alidia said, "Who hit you?"

She had finished breakfast, was lying on the long couch now, her legs stretched out ahead of her. He followed the long curve of her legs, up to the swell of her breasts, his eyes resting on her face.

"What difference does it make?"

"None, surely."

"Then why do you ask?"

"There was a slight disturbance last night."

"Really?"

"Yes. Some men."

"Oh?"

"We've taken them all into custody. Quite a few of them, one the mate of a respectable city merchant."

"Tch-tch," Damion clucked.

"They all profess ignorance and innocence. They claim it was a meeting of their club."

Damion shrugged. "What's all this got to do with my eye?"

"Nothing, of course. I thought you might like to know, however that one of the ringleaders has been caught."

Damion started visibly. *Konars caught?* He mastered control of himself. "Ringleader of what? I thought it was a club meeting."

"**WE** THINK it was a planned conspiracy." She paused. "There was another leader. He got away."

"Did he?"

"Yes, but we have reason to believe he was...ah...injured during the fight." She looked at his eye meaningfully.

"The one you caught. Where are you keeping him?"

"With the rest. In the dungeons."

"I see." He'd have to release *Konars* somehow. Soon.

"He was found near the palace grounds." She smiled slightly. "What do you suppose he was doing here?"

"Taking a walk maybe. The grounds are very pretty at night."

"Mmmm." *Alidia* rose, walked to the window. "Incidentally, Fool, I don't think you should tear up any more of our tapestries."

"What?"

"They're quite expensive."

"I don't..."

"Until we catch the other one, Fool, I think you'd best stay in your quarters. A guard will be posted."

Damion smiled. "Surely you don't think..."

"What I think is a matter between myself and my mind," she snapped. "Get to your quarters!"

He paced the floor of his room, back and forth, back and forth. He glanced at his wrist chron every five minutes, waiting for the time to pass, waiting for darkness to shroud the planet. And at last, the twin moons rose, spectres against the sky, while the sun slowly dropped behind the horizon.

He lay down on the cot, clutched his stomach and shouted, "Ohhhhhh! Help, help."

He heard a faint shuffle outside the door.

"Hellp, please, help," he moaned.

The door snapped open. *Thania's* eyes were worried, large brown saucers behind her freckled nose.

"What is it?" she pleaded. "What is

"My stomach," he groaned. "Please, please."

She stepped closer to the cot, her mouth hanging open.

"What is it?" she pleaded. "What is it?"

"Fever. My head. Burning up. Stomach."

His words had the desired reaction. She reached out, placed her large palm on his forehead. Damion clamped his fingers on her wrist, and he turned rapidly on the cot. His fist came up with surprising rapidity, squashed against *Thania's* nose. He yanked her arm back, twisted it, then brought the edge of his hand down against the back of her neck, once, twice, again, again. She struggled for a moment, shock in her eyes, and then crumpled to the floor.

"Sorry, honey," he mumbled. He unbuckled her large sword, admiring the excellence of her legs as he did so. He looked around the room for something

he could tie her with, remembered the strips of tapestry he'd hidden beneath the cot. He got down on his hands and knees, peering into the blackness. The strips were gone.

Cautiously, he walked to the door, peered into the stone corridor. So far, so good. He closed the door rapidly, considered the problem of the unconscious Amazon again. He ripped off his tunic, tore it, stuffed part of it into her mouth, and gagged her with the rest. Then he removed the leather belt from about her waist and lashed her feet firmly together.

What about her hands? He scratched his chin thoughtfully.

QUICKLY, HE moved the cot to the window. Then he looped one end of the leather strap around the post, dragging the heavy girl to the sill. Without ceremony, he dropped her out, head first. Her hair hung down toward the ground, her arms dangling. He checked the strap again, made certain that it would withstand any of her strugglings, and then picked up the large sword once more. She'd be safe until someone found her. And in the meantime, she was in no position to spread an alarm.

Quietly, he slipped out into the corridor, closing the door firmly behind him.

Now, where were the dungeons?

Down, most likely. All the way down. He started walking down the corridor, his eyes searching every shadow. The click of heels on stone reached his ears, and he quickly pressed himself against the wall. He listened, his ears straining, and finally he heard a door slam somewhere down the corridor.

He began walking hurriedly again. Near the end of the corridor, he discovered a door opening on a long, winding staircase. Without hesitation,

he started down the steps. The stairwell was dimly lit, torches flickering in the wall at irregular intervals. He paused occasionally to listen, proceeding when he was sure he heard no alien sound.

The steps ended abruptly on a dark, stone landing. He peered around the corner of the two walls, trying to adjust his eyes to the darkness. As far as he could determine, there was no one on guard. Were the cells that escape-proof?

He took another tentative step forward.

He heard the whisper then, and his heart lurched crazily. There were voices. One, two, maybe three. He heard the stealthy creep of footsteps. His heart hammered against his ribs as he peered into the blackness, flattening himself against the damp stones.

"This way," a voice whispered.

For a moment, he thought the voice had addressed him, and he almost moved away from the wall. He caught himself, pressed his bare back to the cold surface again.

"Are these the cells?" This voice was louder, a little above a whisper. It was a man's voice.

"I don't know," the first voice whispered. "She didn't tell me where they were. She only said one of the ringleaders was being held in the dungeons."

Ringleaders? Was someone else after Konars? Perhaps these were friends.

"Can't we strike a light?"

"No, not yet. Let's make sure these are the cells first."

Damion heard a scraping metallic sound.

"Looks like a door here."

"This is it, all right."

"Are you sure she was referring to Lakdor?"

Damion frowned. Who the hell was Lakdor?

"Who else could she mean? He was in charge at last night's meeting, wasn't he?" The voice was louder now, and it had a familiar sound.

Damion stirred abruptly, and his sword clanked against the stone wall.

"Hist..." one of the voices said.

A DEADLY APPREHENSIVE silence crowded into the corridor. Damion heard the ragged sound of his own breath, the hurried beating of his heart. He knew they were listening, waiting for another sound.

"All right," one of the voices said suddenly. "Come out of there!"

Damion hesitated.

"Come out or I'll burn you down in your tracks."

The voice was louder, and Damion knew who it was now. He stepped away from the wall.

"Put a light on her," the first voice commanded.

A small beam blinked up into Damion's eyes, and he heard a surprised gasp.

"Well, well, if it isn't the fool!"

"That's who it is, Bendir," Damion said.

"Come here, Fool."

"My name is Damion."

"Come here, Fool!"

Damion stepped forward, the sheen of the Daxonian's weapon gleaming in the light of the beam.

"What are you doing here?" Bendir asked. Damion could see the hard glint of his eyes, the tangled triangle of his beard.

"The same thing you're doing."

Bendir smirked. "And what may that be?"

"I've come to release Lakdor," he lied. One of his problems was taking care of itself. He'd wondered how he

was going to open Konars' cell once he found it. With electronic weapons at his disposal, it would be a simple matter.

"How would you know Lakdor?" Bendir asked, his mouth smirking.

"I was at the meeting last night."

"Were you, now?"

"Yes, I was. I saw them capture Lakdor. Being in the palace, I figured I was in a position to help him escape."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Damion paused a moment, then plunged ahead recklessly. "I know all about your plans. Lakdor told me."

Bendir moved forward swiftly, pushing his weapon against Damion's stomach. "You're a liar, Fool. I was ready to believe you—up to now. But even Lakdor doesn't know the extent of our plans, so he couldn't have told you very well."

Damion shrugged. "Why bother getting him out then? If he's not important, why not just let him..."

"He is important. He's one of our contacts with the men of Krinn. But none of our contacts understand the scope of our plans. Nor do we intend telling them, until it's all over."

"Until *what's* all over?"

Bendir smiled. "Perhaps you'd best wait until it's all over, too. You'll be finding out soon enough."

He prodded Damion with the weapon, forced him down the passageway. They stopped before one of the cells.

"Lakdor?" Bendir asked, his face close to the small opening in the door. There was no answer.

"Perhaps it's one of the other cells," the other man suggested.

"Yes," Bendir agreed. They walked a little further down the corridor, pausing outside another heavy door.

"Lakdor?"

"Yes," a voice answered. "Get me out of here." Damion recognized the voice. It belonged to a fellow named Konars. Good old Konars. He'd probably heard every bit of the conversation, and had seized upon it as his means of escape.

"Stand back, away from the door," Bendir said.

"Hurry up," Konars' voice came again.

"Are you away from the door?"

"Yes, yes. Hurry."

BENDIR TOOK his weapon away from Damion's stomach, pointed it at the metal lock on the door. He pressed a button and an orange shaft of light sprang from the muzzle, arced out to the lock. The metal ran liquid, and Bendir stepped closer to the door.

"Now, Damion!" Konars shouted.

Damion lashed out with his fist as the door sprang outward. He caught the second Daxonion high on the cheekbone, and the man staggered back a few paces. Damion reached out, grasped his scarlet tunic. He brought up a left hook that exploded solidly on the other man's chin.

The man fell to the tones, his weapon clattering to the floor. Damion picked up the weapon, turned to help Konars. Bendir grunted as Konars' big hands whipped into his midsection. Then Konars propped him against the wall, brought up his fist from the floor, and turned to Damion without waiting to see the results."

"Come on, boy, this is important!"

He was already running down the corridor, Damion behind him.

"What's it all about?" Damion asked.

"Lakdor was in my cell. I put him to sleep when I heard your voices." He paused, starting up the winding steps. "But not before he had a chance to

tell me a little of what's going on."

"Well, what *is* going on?"

"I rather suspect that Daxo is planning to take over the planet. At any rate, these damned Daxonians have been inciting the men to rebellion for months now."

"What!"

"You heard me, pal. That explains the lack of resistance when I approached the men. They thought I was just another emissary. Hell, they'd been hearing the same story for a long time."

They were almost at the top of the steps now.

"We'd better hurry," Konars said.

"If we can talk to the queen and get her to..."

A scream tore its way down the steps.

"Holy..."

"Come on," Konars shouted. "We may be too late already."

The palace was in a state of confusion. All through the corridors, Damion and Konars passed women buckling on armor, too intent apparently to pay much attention to the fool.

"Where is she?" Konars asked.

"Straight ahead." They were running down the long corridor that led from the kitchen to Alidia's chambers. "You'd better let me talk to her."

"Allright."

They reached the door, and Konars opened it quickly. Alidia turned, her eyes blazing. She spotted Damion and drew her sword.

"You! You dare come here!"

"Listen, Alidia..."

She was barreling across the room, her sword swinging, her eyes spitting hate.

"So you've finally arranged it, have you? You've finally succeeded!"

"I don't know what you're talk..."

"Out there! Your men are pounding at the gates, Fool."

"They're not my men, Alidia."

"Don't lie to me, Fool!"

"I tell you they're not..."

THE SWORD arced in a wide circle, and Damion dodged the blow. Alidia brought back her arm, preparing for another stroke. Damion lifted the Daxonian weapon, squeezed off. The metal fell from the sword in a molten cascade.

Alidia stared at the sword. "You... you..."

"That's only a sample of what's out there, Alidia. Those men are lead by Daxonians, and you can bet they'll be equipped with these little gadgets."

"Daxon..."

"Yes, damnit. Your pal Bendir is planning to overrun the planet, and chances are he'll succeed, now."

"But..."

"But nothing! Unless we do something fast..."

"But Bendir... his... our talks. He urged me to stay away from the Federation. He said it would mean submission... almost slavery... he..."

"He was lying." Damion gestured toward Konars. "We're Federation men. Bendir was lying."

The fire leaped into Alidia's eyes again. "Federation men! And you expect me to believe you? You expect me to take your word over Bendir's." She lunged forward, her big hands grasping.

Damion set his mouth, tossed his weapon aside. He waited for Alidia to approach him, then lashed out with his foot. He felt it smash against her shin bone, felt his toes crumble against the hard bone. Damn it, why couldn't he remember that Krinnians wore sandals. Desperately, he flung himself at her knees, wrapping his arms around

them. He yanked hard, pulling her off her feet. She toppled to the floor in a swirl of skirts and flashing legs.

Damion slapped her across the face, straddling her middle.

"Why you..."

"Shut up!" he shouted. He slapped her again, saw the surprise cover her entire face. She reached out with one of her hands, and he knocked it aside. She tried to lift her head, and he slammed it down against the stones. Then he slapped her again.

The surprise on her face gave way to open-mouthed shock. He reached down quickly, planted his lips firmly against hers.

She squirmed violently, moving her head from side to side. And then her lips softened, and he felt them move in response against his. Her arms came up around his neck. He opened his eyes, looked down the length of his nose. Alidia's eyes were closed tightly.

Quickly, he broke away, scrambled to his feet.

"Get up!"

She seemed to be awakening from a deep sleep. "Fool..." she said. "Fool..."

"My name is Damion!"

"Damion..."

"Get up!"

"Yes, Damion," she said. Her voice was warm.

Damion turned, met Konars' smiling eyes. "Let's get out there now, and see what we can do," he said.

THEY STARTED for the door, Alidia trailing behind them.

The sounds of battle were loud now, voices raised in ragged discord, metal clashing on metal, the sullen crackle of electronic equipment.

They climbed to the parapets surrounding the palace. Outside, it was even worse than Damion had sus-

pected.

The girls were falling back steadily, helpless in the grip of the Daxonian arms. The men pushed forward relentlessly, guns lashing flame. They milled beneath the palace walls. Shouting, swearing. Among them, Damion saw the tell-tale scarlet of the Daxonians, realized it was they alone who bore the *real* weapons.

"We'd better make that call now," Konars suggested.

"No," Damion snapped.

"Why not? That is..."

"The real danger is the Daxonians," Damion said. "If we call in our ships, they'll blast everything in sight. The Krimian men out there are dupes, Konars. Can't you understand that?"

"Sure, but..."

"The Krinnians have got to beat the Daxonians. Alone. If we show them how, fine. But we can't do it for them."

"They'll never do it," Konars said, wagging his head. "The Daxonians have superior arms..."

"You misunderstand. The arms don't mean a damn. Look at all the Krinnians out there with swords! Hell, the Daxonians are only a handful."

"A handful of electronic weapons," Konars said.

"But still a handful. If we can make the Krinnians understand that they're being duped into losing their own planet..."

"How do you intend accomplishing that miraculous feat?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you'd better find out in a hurry. It looks as if they're getting ready for an all-out attack."

Damion whirled rapidly, seized Alidia by her arms.

"Can your girls hold out for a while?"

"I... I suppose so. Those guns..."

"Never mind the guns. Can they

hold out?"

"If... I guess so. Damion, I was wrong about all this. Perhaps we should have..."

"We'll talk about it later." He tugged on her arm, and she bent down. He kissed her fleetingly, and then said, "Come on, Konars. I've got an idea."

They were in the dungeons again, the light pale, the odor rank and musty with the smell of centuries.

"What are we..."

"There are two Daxonian uniforms down here. I want them."

"What for?" Konars asked.

"We're going to playact for a little while."

"I don't get it."

"You will." Damion stopped to get his bearings. "Around this corner, Konars."

They turned the corner, walking at a fast clip. Damion pulled up abruptly when he heard the voice.

"That's quite far enough, Fool."

Bendir was holding a weapon in his fist, a smaller weapon than his previous one, but it looked just as deadly.

"I'm glad you're awake," Damion said. "It'll save me the trouble of undressing you."

"Don't make jokes," Bendir warned.

"I WANT your clothes, chum."

"Isn't that strange? I want something from you, too."

"What?"

"Your life." Damion sensed the urgency behind the words. He dropped flat to the stones as the flame lanced over his head. He heard a click as Bendir slapped another lethal cartridge into the chamber. He braced his feet, leaped forward.

The flame lanced out again, at the ceiling this time. The stone crumbled

and dropped to the floor. Damion gripped Bendir's hand as he heard another cartridge click into place.

The bearded man struggled, swinging the arm, trying to shake Damion's tightening fingers. They rolled over on the floor, Bendir on top now.

Damion heard the shuffle of Konars' feet.

"Stay out of this," he shouted, rolling over again.

He gripped Bendir's hand with both his own, began slamming it against the hard floor. He heard the bones crunch, felt the hand turn soggy with blood as he kept pounding. Finally, Bendir released his grip on the weapon. Damion kicked it across the passageway, heard it collide with the far wall.

He wrapped his fist in Bendir's tunic, pulled him to his feet.

"Come on, Commander!" he whispered through clenched teeth. "Drink my blood."

Bendir brought up his knee, gouging at Damion's groin.

"Why you lousy..."

Damion clenched his fist into a tight, hard ball. He brought it back, unleashed it with the force of a trip-hammer. He felt the shock clear up to his shoulder. Bendir grunted, ducked his head, then clamped his teeth on Damion's arm.

"A man's planet, huh?" Damion shouted. "A man's planet! Do you pull hair, too?"

He pulled his arm away, the skin ripping from Bendir's teeth. His fist clenched again, and he threw it forward. He felt the snap of Bendir's head, swung again as the man went down.

He was breathing hard, standing over the Daxonian.

"Come on," he said at last. "Let's get this over with."

Alidia let them out through a side door, not fifty feet away from the

milling invaders. They wore the scarlet uniforms of the Daxonian now, and they held the guns that went with the uniforms. The clothes Konars had taken from Bendir's crony were tight, and he moved forward stiffly.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said.

"You can tell your grandchildren about this some day," Damion said.

"If I live to have any."

"Shhhh."

They slipped into the group of men easily, two more scarlet uniforms among the Krinnians.

"What now?"

"A little further," Damion said. "I want to get in the middle here."

The men were standing about, apparently waiting for direction. Off to one side, the Daxonians were in conversation, planning the next assault.

"Lift me up," Damion said.

"What?"

"On your shoulders. Come on. I want to make sure they all can see me."

KONARS COMPLIED, hefting Damion easily.

"All right, men!" Damion shouted.

The men stopped grumbling, looking up at the scarlet-clad figure.

"We're going to make our next attack soon, so listen carefully."

The men cheered, throwing their hats into the air. They were getting impatient with all the delay. From the corner of his eye, Damion saw the Daxonians look up with interest.

"You Krinnians are performing a great service," Damion said. "And when the planet is in our hands, you'll be rewarded."

He heard the confused murmur of the men, saw the knot of Daxonians move a little closer.

"You'll find that Daxo is not an ungrateful planet! We among you, we
(continued on page 99)

Death On The Betelguese

By Dee Arlen

BILL CRANE was only eighteen at the time, and he was making the Martian run on the passenger liner *Betelguese*, actually a converted cargo carrier, running between Terran Station and Phobos. Since interplanetary travel has increased so vastly with the application of Atomics, ships have been multiplying like rabbits.

At Mars minus two days, he had discovered an electronic relaying section of the ship on the number two bulkhead and despite the warning signs in six languages on the door, Bill entered the little room and found it fascinating. It was essentially the control center and of course was jammed with racks, cables wires, tubes and all the paraphernalia of electronic gadgetry.

He watched Larsen turn suddenly to the Captain.

"Sir," he said, "Freighter *Orpheus* request permission to match velocities and bring an injured crewman aboard. They have no doctor and the man's badly burned."

"Of course," the Captain replied, "tell 'em to match and send him on. Dr. Frane will take care of him."

This little exchange was not extraordinary though Bill thought it dramatic and moving. Rescue work in deep space. He remained at the monitor fascinated. He switched to a view of the boarding lock—external and internal and he could see the careful maneuvering of a standard KK-class freighter coming alongside to transfer the man.

Wide-eyed, Bill watched. The freighter carefully matched velocities, paralleling the *Betelguese* at two hundred meters. From the open lock of the freighter, somebody shot a line across and a few moments later a "sick-suit" shaped somewhat like a coffin, was being escorted along the handline by three men from the freighter.

Bill shifted the monitor to internal view and watched the interior door open. The coffin-like suit came in followed by the crewmen. Dr. Frane and the Captain waited to receive them.

The crewman who was the leader of the little group, without removing his helmet, stepped forward to the head of the sick-suit and opened the clips on it. A yellowish gas burst from the container in enormous volume and Bill saw Dr. Frane, the captain and passengers suddenly grasp at

their throats and then sink helplessly to the floor. Bill's trembling hand ran over the monitor switch and he saw the scene duplicated everywhere as the air pressure units spread the insidious gas all over the ship.

Without hesitation, the space-suited figures went through the ship, cabin after cabin, room and hold after room and hold. They missed nothing. Sick with fear and numb with horror Bill crouched in his suit in one corner of the relay room. Then an idea struck him. He put himself back against the suit-rack just as if he were still an empty suit. Anything more than the casual inspection would show the suit filled with a man, but there was simply no place to hide.

As he expected the door swung open and a head stuck itself in, started to make a cursory sweep of the room, but before it could focus on the suits, someone outside must have said something and the door slammed shut. Bill was safe!

There was no petty looting. In the control room, Bill saw and heard the pirate leader giving orders, completely oblivious of the dead bodies around him.

"...Ferrin's got the drug supply and liquor ready for trans-shipment. Forget about the junk. Make sure we nail all tools and instruments. You know what that stuff'll bring on Venus..."

Calmly and coolly the pirate leader ordered the calculated looting of the *Betelguese*, taking only materials of use in general deep-space and colonial work.

Finally the leader gave the order to abandon ship.

"All right, boys. That does it. I'm setting her for full blast. She'll hit the Martian deserts and there won't be a shred of metal left at the velocity she'll have..." He laughed. "The Phobos station will think she's simply vanished. I'm putting her in a paraboloïd that'll throw clear of any possible radar or Patrol detection."

A few minutes later he and his men were gone and Bill saw the freighter-rock- et disappear. He was alone aboard an empty vessel filled with dead men.

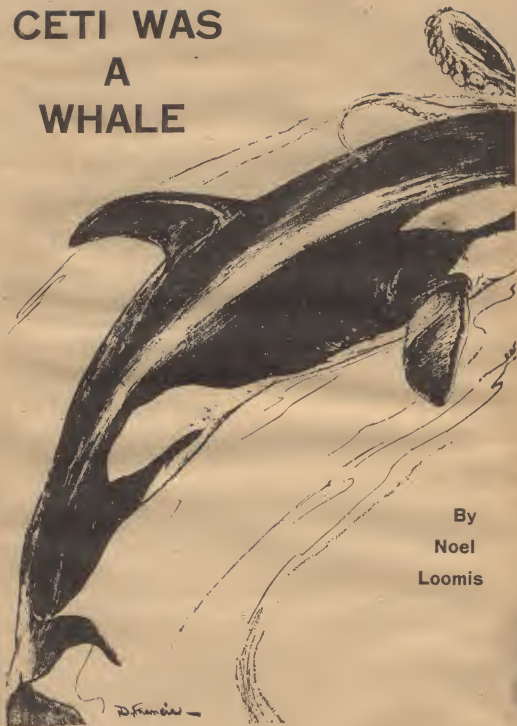
It took no genius to use the radio equipment and a half hour later when he was sure the pirates were gone for good and out of range, he put through the top-priority emergency one.

The Phobos station picked him up and caught his story after they were able to convert his babbling into common sense. When he was calmed down sufficiently, they showed him how to cut power.

Five hours later a Patrol ship matched the *Betelguese* and the Lawmen boarded and took over.

And that was Bill's role. Triplanet Insurance took care of him with a hundred thousand credits. The Patrol caught the pirates who were planning a series of grand coups like this and which probably would have succeeded for some time.

CETI WAS A WHALE



By
Noel
Loomis

The octopus waited alertly for Ceti's move



**Ceti measured his years in eons and ages.
He was the oldest of living things but he
was now very tired and he wanted to die**

CETI BEGAN to level off when he got down to six hundred fathoms. He would have liked to go on to the floor of the ocean, for that area had long been a breeding-ground for the giant squid—and Ceti was hungry.

The hunger was worse because he was big. At ninety feet he was the biggest sperm whale in the waters of

the Earth. But he was also old—one hundred and forty million years old—and the pressure at six hundred fathoms, nearly a ton to the square inch, had in the last few generations begun to bother him.

He was forced to spend a great deal of energy to keep the black water from crushing him, and that meant he must go oftener to the surface to breathe,

and there he always ran the risk of being seen by Man—that puny creature which he remembered from the Mesozoic era as a small, furry, lemur-like animal with fore-limbs that were developing flexibility at the ends and a marked tendency to cling to small objects.

And Ceti remembered with some feeling of embarrassment how he had looked on Man with particular distaste because Man was always scurrying from one place to another.

A squid floated by. Ceti felt it rather than saw it in the deep blue blackness. It weighed around a thousand pounds, he thought, and would have made a nice meal, but Ceti thought of the fight it would put up and he decided to wait for a smaller one. A thousand years ago, or even a hundred, he would have lunged toward it. He would have crunched one of its tentacles in his big teeth and would have reveled in defeating its writhings and its searing slashes at his sides, and his appetite would only have been invigorated, and he would have been proud of the scars it left.

But now he let it go.

And soon he started to rise again, vaguely hoping for a smaller squid on the way up. His great flukes beat slowly. Within an hour he reached eight hundred feet, and the first light, a pale grayness, became apparent to his eyes.

When he saw the light, he suddenly realized that he was cold, and it came to him then he had not much longer to live. The layer of blubber that had protected him for uncountable years was getting thin—thin because it was too hard to get food to keep his great frame covered.

HE FELT sad now, but not because of the knowledge he was dying. He was sad because on a steaming hot

day a hundred and forty million years before, he had made a tragic mistake. He had thought the Cetaceans, with their great brain-power, could live their own lives without taking any other species into account.

— On that day the whales could have become masters of the Earth. They were the largest and most powerful creature on Earth, and they had far the biggest and best brain of the planet. But they had used that brain; used it in the way that had been decided on by the first intelligent Cetaceans: toward development of philosophy and an inner spiritual fullness that had made them probably the most contented creatures in all the galaxy.

Ceti had not wanted the whales to be masters of the Earth. That mastery would have involved complications that would have completely upset their way of life—but he had not foreseen that there would have to be rulers of some sort.

In the thousands of generations succeeding his mistake, he had seen the whale brain become larger and larger, and much more convoluted than the Man-brain. It had enabled the Cetaceans to find a contentment that Man never dreamed of—but there was a price. The Cetaceans had weeded out all their tendencies toward ambition and aggressiveness, and by the year 100 A. D., Ceti faced the brutal fact that they were defenseless against the sharp weapons of Man, who had driven himself relentlessly until he had acquired a terrifying instrument for the utilization of what feeble mental powers he possessed.

That instrument was the opposed thumb.

And Ceti now, as he drifted upward, and as the watery dimness gave way to light, remembered the star-visitor's final words: "I can endow you with

the wisdom to live forever, but one thing I cannot do: I cannot give you the *will* to live. When you shall have become disillusioned and discouraged, then you will be old, and then you will die in spite of all your wisdom."

Ceti wasn't ready to die. There might yet be something he could do to save the Cetaceans from extinction. But he felt no encouragement, and somewhere in the depths of his marvelous brain the fleeting thought struck him that perhaps the lack of an idea was itself a sign of the degeneration of will that Lotu had indirectly predicted.

He was up to four hundred feet now, and a school of great blue parrotfish swarmed toward him from the front and went past him on all sides, but through some strange crystallization of inertia he did not even open his great mouth, and when they were past he was hurt, because they hadn't even tried to avoid him. They knew.

Ceti faced the blunt truth that he didn't care any more. The pangs of hunger were not sharp enough to stimulate the dead weights that were his great muscles.

Sounds came to him then—waterborne sounds. He had no ears, but a very sensitive mechanism for detecting vibrations of aural frequency when they came through the water, and now he recognized the exhaust of a gasoline engine, and from the clanking and thuds he discerned the ominous sound-pattern of a whaling-boat.

NORMALLY he would have given an alarm to the others of his school and then would have changed course and maintained depth to bring him to the surface some miles away, but now the cells of his ancient body were fighting for oxygen, so his great flukes beat up and down and he con-

tinued to rise, not wanting to be killed, but not wanting to live strongly enough to be cautious. After all, he was old and he knew the ways of Man and he had a better brain than Man. He knew how to handle a harpoon if he should get one.

The tip of his snout broke the water and his single nostril quivered as he sent a column of warm, moisture-laden air diagonally forward with a hiss that would carry half a mile. His great sides heaved as he expelled the dioxide. In a moment fresh air would rush into his lungs and bring oxygen to his thin blood.

But he felt a jar in his body and a sharp, deep pain in his side, and he remembered the whaling-boat. He swung around and saw it, within less than fifty yards.

He heard a Man shout, "Hey, look! Thatn's got hind legs!" and he remembered then that he alone, of all the whales in the oceans of Earth, had his anal flippers.

The Cetaceans had just begun to leave the water at the time of Lotu's visit to earth, and had developed flippers for mobility on land, but after it was seen that Man's aggressiveness was keeping pace with the development of his thumb, the whales had decided to return to the water for safety, and the anal flippers had disappeared except for vestigial traces.

Ceti wouldn't give them a chance to examine those promordial limbs. He knew from long experience that if a whale would harden himself to the pain, he could dive deep enough either to break the rope or to upset the boat. Or he could come up directly under the boat.

Ceti knew what he faced. He knew that Man had developed longer and longer ropes, because Man, with all his facilities, which were direct results of his opposed thumb, still was too ig-

norant to prepare lubricating oil for his "fine" instruments as satisfactory as the oil he could extract from a whale's body.

Ceti took a great breath. He elevated his tail flukes and dived almost vertically. Even as he did so it came to him that he was already exhausted from his unfruitful search for food, and he wondered, as he rushed down into the blackness and cold, why he was even trying to get away. But he knew the answer, too: his will to live had been excited by the sudden danger and strengthened by the flow of adrenalin to his blood.

Lotu had said, "I cannot give you the will to live. When you lose that, you will die."

Ceti only knew that he wanted to get away. As the water became blacker and colder, his thoughts went back more and more to Lotu, to that first day, one hundred and forty million years before, when Lotu had made himself apparent to the whales.

It was a steaming hot day in the Mesozoic era, and Ceti was wallowing in a salt marsh not far from the ocean, trying out his newly developing anal flippers and keeping out of sight of a herd of Brontosauri half a mile to the windward.

Ceti was most comfortable. He was eight years old, fully mature, and quite in accord with the Cetaceans' accepted way of life.

THE INCESSANTLY aggressive lemur-things were not intelligent enough to be happy. They were always on the go, trying something new, striving for greater physical powers. The Cetaceans, on the other hand, directed their great mentality toward intellectual extension rather than physical—and it made a very full existence.

He half dozed in the hot sun, and

then became aware of a voice beating in his brain. He relaxed dreamily and invited the voice to continue. At first he thought it was a mental wave from a dinosaur, but obviously that was a mistake, for what small brain the dinosaur had was devoted almost wholly to stuffing its cavernous gizzard with food.

But as the receptive lobe of his mind relaxed, Ceti imagined he could distinguish thoughts—thoughts with a strangely alien caste.

"I am Lotu," said the alien thought. "I am from Betelgeuse."

Ceti rolled from side to side in the warm mud. He opened his small eyes for a moment and looked out over the marsh on both sides of him, and then he thought, "I can't see you."

"I am an entity," said the alien voice, "formless and invisible. You might call me an energy-nucleus. You could not detect me without highly developed instruments."

"I am flattered," said Ceti, "that you have made contact with me—though I never heard of Betelgeuse. Is that in the ocean?"

"It is a star," the voice replied.

"Oh, I see," Ceti said politely, and it occurred to him that here was a great field for mental development that the Cetaceans had not explored.

"You are president of the Cetacean council," Lotu said. "That is why I have come to you."

"I would be happy," Ceti said, "to do anything within my power, but we Cetaceans are limited in what we can do for others. Our leaning has been toward mental and spiritual development."

"Thank you, but I do not need a favor. Your earth has helped me already. I was exploring this section of the galaxy preparatory to cataloguing the solar systems, and in the long trip

out to your system I used so much energy without replenishment that I could not get home."

"What kind of energy do you use?"

"Largely gamma rays," said Lotu, "but some others are necessary in very small amounts, and mostly they come from the disintegration of uranium and plutonium, which are neither one very common. I visited half a dozen planets before I came to your earth."

"And you are ready to travel again?" Ceti asked, sleepily polite.

"Yes, and I'm glad. I was getting homesick. I've been away some eight-hundred thousand years. But before I go, I want to express my gratitude for earth's help. I have selected the three most promising species of earth's creatures, to each of which I will grant one desire. That is, each species may have one wish fulfilled, as long as it is a wish that can be brought about through natural development."

Ceti digested this idea, and then he said, "What are the three species?"

"The Cetaceans, whom I have selected for their well-developed brain-power; the small, furry animals, for their aggressiveness and adaptability; and the Dinosaurs for their numerical predominance. I thought it would be interesting to come back a billion years from now and see what each species has done with its gift."

ABOUT THIS time Ceti began to awaken from his drowsiness, and his first fully conscious thought was: "What a fantastic dream."

In his great brain circulated the thought that it would be interesting if those three species he had dreamed about could actually make a choice of gifts. Undoubtedly they would choose with radical difference.

The lemurs, always busy, always trying to do something they had not

been able to do before, would undoubtedly choose something to extend their physical powers, without regard for their brain, while the Dinosaurs—well, they were big and spent all their time eating, so—

"You are president of the Cetacean Council," said the voice in his brain. "What would the whales choose?"

Ceti lay perfectly still for a moment in the marsh, and then his sixty tons quivered all over as he verified the fact that the voice had indeed come from another creature. Suddenly he was scared, for the first time in his life. His small eyes shifted rapidly, and he tried to see around him, but the voice went on:

"Don't be alarmed. It is just as I have told you. I'll leave you now, but tomorrow I shall be back for your answer. Choose well, for I can help you."

The voice was gone. Ceti struggled with his inclination to think it was a dream. He worked his way to a great clump of ferns and looked through. The Brontosauri in the next valley were all gathered in a close-packed herd as if they were talking together.

Ceti backed away. The Brontosauri were not too smart; they would fall for anything. But that very thought startled Ceti. If they had heard it, too—

He began to work back to the sea, alternating between the feeling that he was very foolish, and the opposite feeling of tremendous urgency. By the time he got into deep water he was excited, but he excused himself with the thought that if the situation should be true, the choice was a vital one. If it was a dream, nothing would be lost anyway. Presently his powerful flukes were driving his body at his top speed of twelve knots.

He sent word ahead in thought-waves, and by morning, when he

reached the coral-reef, the eleven other members of the council were rolling together in the ocean-swells. There was Nard, the Finback, and Mores, the old Gray Whale, and a representative each from the Bowheads, the Humpbacks, the Blues, the Right Whales, the Sei, the Bottle-nose, the Pilots, and the Pygmies. These were on one side of the reef, and Niko, the young, ambitious councilman from the Killers, was on the other side. The Killer Whales were indeed killers, and afraid of nothing on land or sea, and always hungry, so the eleven other councilors did not allow Niko to meet on the same side of the reef with them.

While Niko swam restlessly up and down on the opposite side, Ceti told his story hesitantly. There was a good deal of discussion, but for some reason even Niko refrained from derisiveness, and eventually they reached the same conclusion: that nothing would be lost by making a choice. Then Niko, the Killer, threshed the water with his powerful flukes and thought:

"We whales are the largest and most powerful creatures on Earth. We have the most highly convoluted brain. We have everything we need but an organ to hold a weapon—I mean a tool. If we could grasp and hold a tool we could rule the world."

NARD, THE FINBACK, spoke up quickly: "You Killers are always driving, driving. We don't want to be masters of the Earth. We're happy as we are."

"We can't stay this way," Niko argued impatiently. "If we don't run the world, some other creature will. And then we'll be in for it."

Mores, the old Gray bull, spoke up: "Niko is right. We can't ignore the other creatures."

"We can always go back into the

sea," Ceti pointed out. "There we would be safe. We are intelligent enough to preserve our own species without paying attention to any others."

So the argument had gone for hours, and then Ceti threw all the weight of his prestige into the decision. "I am opposed," he said, "to anything that would depart from the long-established policy of our ancestors, but we could do this: we could ask for a still better brain. Then, if some other species becomes dictatorial, I am sure we could outwit them, no matter what they choose."

Niko drove his twenty tons against the coral at Ceti, and big chunks split off under the power of his drive. The rasping sound of his hide against the coral was like an avalanche of gravel. The Killer's eyes were red, and Ceti involuntarily dove. But Niko couldn't crash the reef.

They voted. It was seven to five for a better brain. Ceti left as soon as the vote was taken, and settled into the long swim back to the marsh, well satisfied, even though now he began to wonder if after all it wasn't really a dream.

He found the spot in the marsh where his big body fit comfortably in the warm mud, and he was just beginning to doze again when the voice came in his mind:

"I see you have chosen."

Ceti was startled, but he gathered his wits. Probably the whole business was imagination, but he answered courteously: "Yes, the council has made a decision."

"I see what you want," Lotu said; and his voice sounded dubious.

"We will follow the ways of our fathers," said Ceti, "and I, for one, hope for greater philosophical development than ever before."

"It's a dangerous way," said the voice of Lotu. "I wish you had taken something else. The little furry animals have asked for an opposed thumb."

"They're always ambitious," Ceti said complacently.

"Yes, they have drive."

"Too much drive," said Ceti. "Their intelligence doesn't match it."

"I think it's better to say their brain-power doesn't match it. After all, you know, intelligence is a combination of a good many things. It is quite a different thing from brain-power."

BUT CETI was not disturbed. "What did the Brontosauri want?" he asked.

"An extra head in their tail, so they can find food more easily."

"They were always gluttons," thought Ceti. "Can you give them that?"

"Oh, yes, of course. It will take a good many million years, but I can set some cosmic rays in motion that will affect the genes of any species to bring about eventually a given result."

"It's all very interesting," Ceti said. "It would be nice if one could live long enough to see how it comes out."

"Would you like that?" asked Lotu thoughtfully.

"Yes, I think I would. Of course I know how it will come out in the end, but it would be interesting to check."

"I see," Lotu said somberly. "Well, I'll tell you what." His voice brightened. "I'll do that for you. It's just a matter of certain elements in food, and perhaps a few little things I can do to your mind with some stray emanations."

Ceti was really startled now. He couldn't say anything. And while he was trying to decide how to back out

of it gracefully, and hoping Lotu wouldn't see that this last proposal, coming right out of a clear sea, had shaken his faith in the whole business, the voice came again:

"There. I have blocked your worry lobe, and done a few other things. You can live as long as you wish. But remember this: one thing I cannot do. I cannot give you the will to live. When you are tired of living, you will die."

And then the voice went away, and Lotu was gone, and in the next few years Ceti decided that it had all been an illusion, but one day he realized that he was twelve years old and should have been dead, and he tried out his flukes on a trip across the ocean, and he dove to a full thousand fathoms and still felt good when he came up.

After his sons had grown up and died, and his grandsons, and their sons, and still Ceti was apparently in his prime, he began to take Lotu's visit seriously. Ten thousand years later he was still president of the council, and he it was who persuaded them to vote against being amphibious, and took them back to the sea.

In the next million years he saw the Brontosauri begin to develop perceptions in their huge tails, and he guessed that a brain was forming there. The ends of the lemur-like creatures' arms were beginning to split into separate appendages, and those busy little animals were even trying to climb the huge ferns that grew in the marshes, and were learning to leap clear of the ground for an instant.

These things Ceti saw, and he recognized the development of the thumb as a potential instrument of aggression, and he felt very well satisfied that he had led the whales back to the sea.

He saw that Man had a certain

shrewdness, but that was nothing to alarm a whale. Ceti watched it all with tolerant amusement. The whale-brain was becoming a perfect mechanism, and the Cetaceans were reaching heights of philosophical and spiritual comfort that had not been foreseen when Lotu had given them the choice.

ALL WERE happy but the Killers. They were always driving, hammering, wanting to branch out, wanting to go back to the land and show Man and the Brontosauri what they could do with their great bodies and their marvelous brain-power. But Ceti curbed their restlessness and went on unperturbed, as a wise old grandfather watches his youngsters. Well, no, he didn't exactly curb the Killers' restlessness, but he denied it access to the land, and so the Killer Whales had become the scourge of the seas, and even the big Blues and the Sperm Whales traveled always in herds when Killers were in the vicinity.

The ages went by, but Ceti lived on. His incredible longevity was accepted as a natural thing, and he did not attract attention except as the oldest and wisest—and now the biggest—whale in all the waters of the Earth.

He shrugged when the Brontosauri, with their two brains, ate so much that they became too heavy and sluggish to move around for food. It got to the point where a Brontosaurus was not able to support its own weight except by wallowing in the marsh, and many of them died of old age without moving more than a few rods from where they were born. Ceti saw them become extinct almost overnight when the great ice came down and the ferns wilted and died.

Ceti was not alarmed when the small animals became Man and learned to use their hands to grasp stones and

sticks with their opposed thumbs, and to use those stones and sticks to subdue other creatures to their will.

FINALLY CAME the day when he felt he couldn't go to the bottom, and when the big squid floated past him he didn't have the energy to attack it. And he had gone back to the surface, aimlessly, carelessly, to come up close to a fishing-boat and take a harpoon in his great flank.

His breath was tight now in his lungs, but still he drove on, deeper than he had gone for many years, and here the water was black and no light from the sun penetrated its depth.

He was down with the big squids. He was where he belonged. He reached the bottom and sank into the deep muck. The harpoon hurt a little, but not too much. Not so much that Ceti couldn't show Man that a puny creature with an opposed thumb and an insignificant brain could never rule the earth.

While he was resting in the mud he sent out a thought-wave to the school of Killers that he knew was somewhere above him: "Call a council meeting for tonight. I, Ceti, am going to throw my prestige into the balance for aggressiveness. The Cetaceans have been passive long enough. Let's use our brain—"

His great length shook with indignation at Man's puny efforts to overcome a lack of brain-power with drive and with an opposed thumb. And when he stirred, something at the barbed end of the harpoon in his flank exploded and tore his great body half in two.

The black water washed into him, but with his last tremendous heartbeat Ceti tried to send out warning to the Killers.

THE END

(continued from page 88)

In scarlet, have been watching you carefully. When Daxo is in control, we will remember our friends."

"Great Kudos," Konars said, "what are you trying to do?"

"Daxo?" one of the men shouted. "What are you talking about?"

A chorus of voices grumbled their protest, and Damion held up his hands to silence the crew.

"You'll find that life under Daxonian rule is far better than the meagre existence you've had up to now. The Daxonians are good rulers, and we will treat you well."

He heard the angry mutter again, pretended it didn't affect him. "But first we must storm the walls," he bel-lowed. "We must clear out all the Krinnian scum, subdue the Krinnian degenerates, utterly destroy the base, vile, evil Krinnian..."

"They're getting mad, pal," Konars whispered.

"...Krinnian empire," he continued. He paused when he saw the gleam in the eyes of the Krinnian men. "Watch the boys in red," he whispered to Konars, "and get ready to get out of here in a hell of a hurry."

"And then," he shouted, "the glorious Daxonians will lift you out of your ignorance and filth. The Krinnian shame will be forgotten forever as the splendor of Daxo..."

"That's it!" Konars shouted. "That does it!"

The Krinnians leaped forward as one man, their weapons swinging wildly. Damion dropped to the ground and headed back toward the palace.

"Don't let them get away," he heard someone shout.

"Kill the filthy beggars."

He glanced over his shoulder, saw the Daxonians break out their guns. There were a few sputtering flames of protest, and then the tide of Krin-

nians swept forward. Damion ripped off his tunic, tossing it over his shoulder.

"They need some help, I think."

He wasn't surprised to see that Konars had already removed his tunic, and was moving forward toward the source of the Daxonian firing.

The men in scarlet were gathered into a tight red circle that bristled with guns. The Krinnians closed on them, and the Daxonians held their fire, waiting.

"We'll never break that circle," Konars said. "They've got enough firepower there to stop an army."

AND THEN suddenly, dropping from the walls of the palace like so many released boulders, Damion saw the fighting women of Krinn, tunics flaring out over their waists, swords singing. They dropped into the circle and the Krinnian men raised their voices in a blood cry.

The Daxonian circle spit flame, but the women were among them now, and the wall rapidly crumbled.

Damion charged forward, his weapon firing, clicking, firing again. There were Krinnians behind him now, shouting, taking him for one of their own now that his back was bare.

Across the field, close to the palace wall, he saw Alidia hacking away at a man in a red tunic. Beside her, their shoulders touching, stood Thania. He wondered briefly how she'd found her way out of the position he'd left her in.

Then he broke into a sprint, the gun in his hand leaping as he fired. Konars was right behind him.

Three men in red closed on Thania and Alidia. The girls stood back to back, their swords cutting a wide swath around them.

"Those damn fools are going to get killed," Konars said.

Damion kept running forward. He

clicked a cartridge into place as soon as he was close enough, squeezed the button. A Daxonian curled up on the ground, his body black. Damion fired again, and another man dropped. Behind him, he heard the crackle of Konars' gun, saw the third man crumble to the ground.

He ran to her, and she dropped to her knees, sobbing like a little girl. He ran his fingers through the fire of her hair, touched her face, kissed her gently.

"It's all over, Alidia," he said. "It's all over now."

The sounds of victory were loud around them. Konars looked at Damion with some embarrassment. Thania turned away, not used to seeing her queen kissed.

Men were clapping women on the back, and women were lifting men into their arms. Swords were being tossed into the air along with hats, shoes, buckles, anything that wasn't nailed down.

"Well," Konars said, "it looks as if it really is all over now."

Thania nodded, her freckles glistening under a coat of sweat.

IT WAS WONDERFUL what science could accomplish, Konars reflected.

He sat on the foamite couch on the porch of his home, peering out at the stars overhead. Sighing deeply, he pressed a button on the side of the couch and soft music sifted onto the porch.

The old warrior, he mused, with no more worlds to conquer. Daxo? Even Daxo had adapted readily to Federation techniques once Bendir had been ousted. A changing universe, for sure. A universe of peace.

He thought briefly about Damion, wondered if he were truly happy with his new bride. He admitted grudgingly that Alidia was a wonderful woman,

and now that things were changed...

Still, she had been a queen, and he pondered the advisability of being married to such a woman.

Well, queens could change, too, he supposed. Everything else had changed, by Kudos. Why not a queen?

He fumbled in his tunic for his pipe, grinned when he realized he'd probably left it inside again. He leaned back, pressed a toggle in the wall, out his mouth close to a speaker.

"Yes?" a soft voice answered.

"Will you bring me my pipe, please?" he said. "I seem to have left it inside again."

"Oh, Konars."

"Sorry, honey. You shouldn't have married an absent-minded dolt."

He could hear the smile in her voice. "I'll be right out."

He sighed, leaned back against the foamite again. He'd have to drop in on Damion tomorrow, maybe invite him and Alidia over for the weekend.

The plexolite door swung upward, and a young woman with wide brown eyes and a freckle-covered nose stepped out onto the porch.

"Here," she said, handing him the pipe.

He reflected about the door, and about the woman who stood by his side now. He rose, took the pipe, and put his arm around her waist. Her head reached to his shoulder, and he sniffed at her hair in appreciation.

Yes, science was a wonderful thing, all right.

Around them, the bushes and rocks gleamed with a million incandescent eyes. Overhead the twin moons glared down balefully.

"I think, Thania," he said, "that the only thing I'll never like about this planet is..."

He looked up at the moons again, smiling.

THE END

Land Of The Matriarchs

By E. Bruce Yaches

FRANK MASON handed the Venerian the one-gram packet of tobacco. The Venerian extended a psuedopod and unfolded it, withdrawing packet and psuedopod into itself.

"My Fathers request You-of-the-Source to deliver more of this substance to me, their Son," Frank hefted the leaves of *deen* which the Venerian had given him. "Will You-of-the-Source oblige within the next few darkings and lightings?" Protocol demanded that he refer to the Venerians' origin from the "Prime Source" for the little creatures placed infinite faith in externals and verbal structures.

The thin piping voice of the Venerian replied graciously:

"We-of-the-Source will enjoy doing this action for a Son of the Fathers such as you."

With abruptness the creature sphered itself and rolled like a three-foot bowling ball through the open door of the aluminum collectors' hut. Frank knew that the Venerian would be back shortly with quantities of *deen*. He liked the Venerians for whom nothing mattered so much as fulfilling an obligation regardless of the reward—though they could bargain at times. Filial duty was the highest belief of the Venerians; "Fathers" was a good name for Biologicals Limited, Venus.

"About time I did a little collecting from the Outlanders too," Frank muttered half-audibly. Enough time alone and it's perfectly normal to carry on audible conversations with yourself. "I'll have to take a run-down to New Paris," Frank said wryly. "I'm beginning to feel too lonesome." Companionship, of women particularly, was scarce outside the few cities, and even they were losing lots of women to the crazy cult of the Matriarchies which had begun to get a foothold even this far from Terra.

Frank jumped into his heliflitter, patted his side to make sure the beamer was there—at night the variety of wriggling, crawling monstrosities that Venerian darkness could bring out, were fearful. He headed due North. His first collecting point was a colony of the Venerians about thirty miles from the hut and almost halfway straight to *City Nightingale*, as the little matriarchal colony was called.

He'd never seen it nor did he care to. Matriarchs often dropped into the cities for supplies and trading and what he'd seen of the girls didn't seem particularly inviting. In addition the Matriarchies were never enthusiastic about male visitors—even bio-chemists.

About twenty miles out, he suddenly

spotted another heliflitter sitting on the soft ground. Automatically on Venus you give assistance. Humans are too few and far apart. He put the flitter down a few feet away from the other.

The girl was working on the engine and obviously she was from the Matriarchy from the markings on the flitter. But she was certainly different. She wore nothing but a brief halter and scanty combination and despite the dirt and grease that marked her, she was beautiful. Her hair was cropped close in the manner of "efficiency" affected by the Matriarchal groups, but even this couldn't disguise the extraordinary femininity of her. Frank felt his pulse rise as he looked at her.

"May I help?" he said politely.

The girl looked at him curiously. "No, thank you," she said and turned back to what she was doing.

"You'd better hurry it, Miss," Frank advised. "Darking's coming on and it isn't nice to be caught on the ground, you know."

The girl dropped her tool-case and faced him in exasperation. Mentally Frank whistled when he saw the full figure. Brother, he thought, if this girl only wasn't half nuts!

"Look," she said, "I don't need any help—or advice. Leave me alone. I'll take care of my flitter. I'm a Matriarch and I need your assistance like a hole in the head." She turned back to her machine.

"I've been told off," Frank said to no one in particular. "It only goes to show what fools the Matriarchies are." If he expected this to elicit a response he was disappointed for the girl paid him no further attention.

Frank went about his business. Within two hours he'd picked up the bio-stuff from the collectors and headed back to his hut. Already it was dusking and soon the darking would be on. It was no place for a lone man—or woman. He flew back along his initial course, but the girl was still working on her machine. As he passed low overhead this time she looked up, he thought anxiously, but she neither hailed him nor said anything. Frank kept on going.

He thought about taking a quick run back North to the Matriarchy and warning them that the girl was isolated but then thought the better of it. The Matriarchs were fanatic enough to take a shot or two at strange males.

(Cont'd On Page 130)

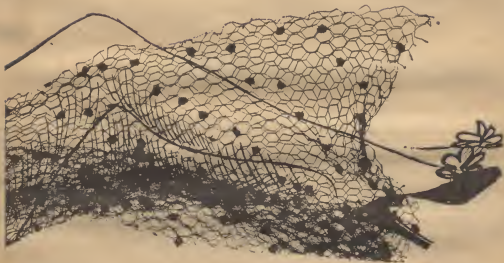


Her fingers became leaves and gently brushed his face

BOY MEETS TREE

By

Tedd Thomey



What happened to Charles shouldn't have happened to a dog. He loved the gal and yearned for her. But every time he stole a kiss, he got a big mouthful of foliage

THERE WAS a lot of hammering at the front of the apartment, so naturally Charlie Mills laid down his book, walked over and opened the door. This, it developed, was a mistake.

Standing in the darkness on the porch was a strange young lady wearing a long white robe which exposed a good deal of her smooth right shoulder.

der.

"What took you so long, darling?" she asked sweetly.

Without waiting for a reply, she glided past him into the apartment, the train of the robe dragging over his toes.

"Now, hold on—" said Charlie.

The young lady swept across the room and sat on the divan. Her hair

was the brightest gold Charlie had ever seen—obviously a superb tinting job—but she wore not a trace of make-up.

"Look," he said, "you can't just come in here like this. Why—"

He paused uncomfortably and cleared his throat although it didn't require clearing. That bare shoulder was distracting.

"Pretty soon," he said, "my landlady will paste her ear to the wall next door. Then she'll rush in here quoting Emily Post and waving an eviction notice. So if you'll—"

The girl just smiled at him.

She smoothed the folds of the robe down around her long legs. It was a rather coarse cotton garment, gathered at her waist by a broad golden belt. On her feet were golden sandals.

"Would you mind stepping out on the porch?" said Charlie politely. "Before Mrs. Oosterban—"

"No."

Charlie frowned. Most of the time he was a pleasant enough young man, but he had a characteristic that popped up at odd times. At the moment, the line of his jaw was on the stubborn side and his eyes were midway between a stubborn gray color and a stubborn blue.

"Listen!" he said grimly. "You've got to go!"

He jammed his hands into the pockets of his coffee-colored slacks and glared down at her from his full five feet eleven inches. He'd found the gesture quite successful when his freshman literature class at high school was late turning in themes.

The girl laid her golden head back on the divan and calmly closed her eyes. At the same time, she raised one arm and, as Charlie watched, the slim fingers and thumb became five fresh

green leaves.

SHE WAVED them at him and sighed musically, her eyes still shut. "You've no idea how wonderful it is to be able to relax again."

"Holy cow!" said Charlie.

Quite smoothly, the leaves became slim fingers once again and the girl patted the cushion beside her. "Come over and sit down, Charlie, darling."

"Holy cow!" said Charlie.

Mouth hanging ajar, he stood there for a long moment staring at her until interrupted by a tapping at the screen door. Reluctantly, he turned and went to the door.

Mrs. Oosterban was waiting on the porch. "Good evening, Mr. Mills," she said crisply. Her little black eyes were busy trying to pry around the door jamb into the living room. "I've decided to go through with the redecorating after all."

"Uh," said Charlie. "I—"

"Just take a minute," continued Mrs. Oosterban, the mole on her chin moving up and down rapidly as she talked.

"Well," said Charlie, swallowing. He knew her redecorating talk was just an excuse to get in. Frantically he realized there was no way he could explain the girl—especially that bare shoulder.

Opening the door, Mrs. Oosterban came toe-dancing in. Charlie backed up, waiting for the ax to fall.

To his relief, he discovered that the girl was no longer in the living room.

Disappointment merging with the wrinkles on her face, Mrs. Oosterban announced that they must choose the colors for the bedroom first.

"My," said Charlie amiably, "what Boston couldn't do with a talent like yours."

"Beg pardon?" Mrs. Oosterban's lips pinched together.

"Nothing," said Charlie and fol-

lowed her cautiously into the bedroom.

"Blue would be nice in here," she declared, her eyes whisking over all the possible hiding places from the long, peach-colored drapes to the space behind the dresser. Charlie's eyes were doing a bit of whisking, too. He wondered if the girl were in the closet.

Mrs. Oosterban's elbow neatly brushed a tie clip off the dresser. As she stooped to pick it up, she had an opportunity to peer under the dresser and under the bed as well.

Her face grew longer. In quick order, she chose colors for the closet and the bath. Then she went to the kitchen. Charlie braced himself—but the girl wasn't out there either. He was mystified. The apartment had only one door, the front door, so she couldn't have walked out.

Mrs. Oosterban stalled for another minute before giving up. As she crossed the living room, the stocking on her right leg suddenly unfurled. It slid all the way down her spindly shank to the floor, a long section of broken garter trailing behind her as she walked.

IN HORROR, Mrs. Oosterban clapped a hand across her mouth.

As she fled to the door, there was a loud tipping sound and her other stocking slid downward, another pink section of garter flapping as it fell.

Mrs. Oosterban shrieked and dashed down the steps.

From behind Charlie came an octave of musical laughter. He spun around to find the blonde girl seated again on the divan.

"Did you see it?" she laughed. "The look on her face?"

Charlie laughed too, but abruptly he grew serious. He strode over to the divan.

"Now listen," he said, glaring down at her. "There's a lot of crazy stuff going on around here and I want some straight answers. Who in the blazes are you and what are you running around in that silly get-up for and what was that deal with the leaves?" He paused for breath. "And if I'm going too fast for you—well, sister, that's just too darn bad because you're sure going too fast for me!"

She sat up straight.

"Oh!" she said and her eyes were bright with sudden tears. "Oh! It's just silly is it—and after I wore it especially for you!"

"For me?" demanded Charlie. "That's ridiculous! You don't even know me!"

Her slim fingers rubbed the tears from her eyes. "I do! And I'll show you who's silly! I'll show you!"

One moment she was sitting there on the divan—and the next moment she was gone. Phhh-h-tt! Like an image vanishing from a television tube.

"Holy cow!" said Charlie.

Convinced that he was an idiot, he stared at the divan. It couldn't be! It couldn't possibly be!

Phhhh-t! And she was back again. The white robe, with the single exposed shoulder, was missing. Now she wore a stunning, champagne-colored evening dress—and both creamy shoulders were bare. Her golden hair was upswept in an ingeniously smart coiffure and her large, pretty mouth had been touched with a cherry lipstick.

"Well?" She looked up hesitantly, still wiping tears from one eye.

Charlie didn't reply. Staring at her, he plopped down weakly on the nearest chair.

The girl drew a compact from her purse and looked into the mirror. "I don't care what *you* think," she pouted. "I think I look nice, especially my

hair. The other way was so old-fashioned..."

Charlie sat stiffly on the edge of his chair. His mind was still wobbling. Finally he trusted himself to speak.

"Who?" he asked hoarsely. "Who... are you?"

The blonde girl smiled. "I'm a little disappointed in you, Charlie darling. Why one of the reasons I picked you was because you went to college—and not because you were a champion hockey player either."

"Hockey?" said Charlie stupidly. "College—what's that got to do with who *you* are?"

She raised both slender arms high above her head. "I'll give you another hint."

AS CHARLIE watched, her fingers turned into a number of small green leaves.

"Holy cow!" said Charlie.

"Gracious!" she said. "Do you have to keep saying that all the time?"

In a murky corridor of Charlie's brain, pages of the many volumes he'd read in college blurred as they were flipped swiftly by a mental thumb. He continued to stare at the girl. She was beautiful. He saw now that her hair wasn't tinted—it was quite naturally a polished golden color. Her complexion was incredibly clear and the bone structure of her face was almost delicate. She was exactly the kind of girl he'd always wanted to meet, except—

Abruptly, he remembered.

He left his chair. He backed across the room from the girl who kept smiling at him.

"Good lord!" he shouted. "No! It can't be! You're Daphne?"

She nodded happily. "Well, at last! I was beginning to think you'd never make it!"

"But you can't be Daphne! She was

a character the Greeks dreamed up. She turned into a tree! Mythology—"

The perfect arches of her blonde eyebrows raised slightly. "Well, I like that. I'm a character, am I?"

Charlie nodded absently. He knew he had to get a grip on himself. There must be a logical explanation behind all this.

For a moment, he was silent. Then he spoke carefully, thoughtfully. "There are two answers. One—you're a normal American girl—" He paused and corrected himself. "A *semi-normal* American girl doing all this just for a gag, maybe part of a radio show or something. Or two—you're not really real at all, just a figment of my broken-down imagination."

Very slowly, the blonde girl rose from the divan. Very slowly—almost sinuously—she approached him, the cloth of the champagne-colored evening dress whispering as she walked. Reaching up, she ran her hand soothingly, lovingly down his cheek.

Her fingers were warm and very alive. Her perfume enveloped him, striking fire up his backbone, sparks that skipped from vertebra to vertebra.

"If I were just a figment, Charlie, darling," her voice was low and throaty, "could I do that? And if I were an ordinary American girl, could I do this?"

Again her fingers ran soothingly down his cheek—but midway they became cool, crisp leaves which rustled as they moved.

Charlie leaped away as if he'd been stung. He dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one and puffed frantically, peering at the girl through the twisting smoke.

"You were..." he said, after a moment. "You were a—a wood nymph?"

"I still am," she replied simply.

"And if I remember right," said Charlie, "you never wanted to get married?"

"No," said the girl. "Especially after what Apollo tried to do."

CHARLIE continued to puff furiously. "I thought all the nymphs were crazy about Apollo."

"Not me," she said. She glanced down at the floor, blushing slightly. "I ran and I ran—but he was too fast."

"I remember that part," said Charlie. "Just when he was about to grab you, you hollered for your dad and he turned you into a tree."

The girl laughed. "A laurel tree—and Apollo had a fit. He came up and even beat his fists on my trunk he was so mad!"

"What happened after that?" said Charlie, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I haven't been so bored in ages," she explained. "I just stood there and stood there. I had lots of time to think. After a few thousand years I began to think I'd made a mistake." She shrugged. "The only interesting thing that happened to me was when I'd lose my leaves in the fall. I decided that maybe men weren't so terrible, after all."

"So?" said Charlie.

"I decided to pick myself out a man."

She took a step toward Charlie. "I decided to pick you. I took a quick course in English—and here I am!"

Charlie backed up. That perfume of hers was getting to him again and the room had suddenly become terribly warm.

"Me?" With his palm, he squeegeed perspiration from his forehead. "What made you pick me?"

Her eyes shining, she came another step closer. "Everything. I knew you'd

read all about me, so you wouldn't be too surprised when I dropped in."

"You're so right," said Charlie. "I'm not a bit surprised."

"What's more," she added. "I've been just crazy about your shy smile and the way there's a tiny bit of curl in your hair. Besides—"

She reached up toward him.

"Stand back!" ordered Charlie. He held up his hands protectively. "I got to have time to think! I'll meet you for lunch tomorrow or something—but right now you're getting out!"

He grabbed her arm and started dragging her toward the door. "Either you go or Mrs. Oosterban tosses us both out!"

"I won't!" she cried.

"You're going!"

"No!"

"Just try and stop me!" said Charlie.

He learned immediately that he'd said the wrong thing. The girl wriggled from his grip and when he tried to catch her again, it just couldn't be done.

Quite abruptly, some kind of a transparent barrier surrounded her. It was as though a thick plate glass window had been installed between them.

Every time Charlie tried to grab her, he cracked his knuckles against the stuff, whatever it was.

The girl just stood behind it, laughing and making faces at him.

IN THE MORNING, Saturday morning, Charlie was awakened early by more pounding on the front door. He discovered he was lying on the divan, still wearing his slacks and sport shirt which were pleated and wrinkled from a night of tossing and twisting.

Rubbing the crick in his back, he moved slowly to the door and opened it. Before his eyes were completely in

focus, Mrs. Oosterban had popped in and was making gestures with a yellow yardstick.

"Just take a second," she chirped. "The painters need to know how wide the bedroom is."

With a sense of panic, Charlie remembered Daphne.

"M-Mrs. Oosterban..." he stammered. "I haven't even m-made the bed..."

Brushing him aside, Mrs. Oosterban charged into the bedroom, brandishing the yardstick before her like a cutlass.

Charlie shuddered.

"Well!" said Mrs. Oosterban. "I declare!"

Charlie ventured into the bedroom. Then he blinked. The bed's blue chenille spread was smooth and unfurrowed.

Mrs. Oosterban gave him an acid look. Holding the yardstick against the wall, she proceeded to measure the room.

As she passed the full-length mirror in the closet door, she gaped.

Then she shrieked.

Dropping the yardstick, she galloped from the room, out the front door and down the steps.

For a long, long time, Charlie studied the bed and then the mirror. After a while he went into the bathroom and started to shave. He felt a touch at his elbow and found Daphne standing nearby, smiling mischievously. A yellow chiffon handkerchief had been braided into her golden hair and she wore a bright yellow sun dress.

Charlie spoke coldly. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me what made the old war ax screech like that."

"For some strange reason," said Daphne, "when she saw herself in the mirror she thought she didn't have any clothes on."

Despite himself, Charlie almost

laughed. But the thought that had kept him awake all night returned to sober him.

"That does it!" he said, glowering at the girl. "Maybe you didn't know it but Mrs. Oosterban and the Superintendent of Schools are old buddies! I'm as good as fired right now—and it's all your fault!"

"I'm s-sorry, Charlie darling..." The large eyes glistened damply.

"Don't try any of that bawling stuff on me!" Turning away from her, he angrily mowed down the whiskers on his upper lip.

After a moment, he glanced at her again. Tears were flooding down her cheeks and her pert little chin was quivering.

Charlie laid down the razor. "All right—"

It suddenly occurred to him that she had the largest, brownest eyes he'd ever seen and the next thing he knew she was in his arms. It was the most wonderful, damndest kiss he'd ever had. It was salty and it was sweet. It was fire and it was ice.

"Charlie, darling," Daphne kept whispering. "I do love you so!"

WHEN THEY broke apart, he felt delirious. He staggered and had to lean against the wall for support, and then like a bolt from the heavens the solution came to him.

"By golly!" he shouted, wrapping his arms around her again. "That's it! Mrs. Oosterban and the Superintendent won't have a word to say!"

"How?" said Daphne. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to marry you!" shouted Charlie. "Today—this afternoon!"

Taking her hand, he led her into the living room. "I don't care what you were before. We're going down and get that license!"

"But, Charlie darling..." said

Daphne softly. She moved away from him, slightly aloof. "I'm not going to marry you..."

"What?"

"I'm not going to marry you." She turned and looked out the window.

"For crying out loud!" Charlie grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. "You know I love you, don't you?"

She nodded her golden head.

"And you love me?"

She nodded.

"Then what's the matter?" Placing a finger under her chin, he tilted her face gently upward. "You wouldn't want me to get fired, would you?"

"But, Charlie darling." Her brown eyes were round and solemn. "You don't need a dull old job any more."

She moved over to the maple bookcase. "I was saving this for a surprise."

Opening a volume labeled "Europe Since 1914," she turned the pages. The pages looked green.

Charlie took the book from her and discovered that the pages weren't green. It was just that dozens of clean new five and ten dollar bills had been inserted between them.

Selecting several other books, Daphne handed them to Charlie. "What's more," she said, "I've exchanged your old car for a new one."

Charlie thumbed the pages in two more of the books. They contained enough five and ten dollar bills to set up a branch bank.

His jaw stuck out stubbornly. "What the blazes are you up to?"

"Let her evict you," said Daphne gaily. "We'll buy a big house down by the beach. We'll travel—we'll go all around the world, to Madrid, Honolulu, even to Parnassus and Mt. Olympus and I'll show you the sights!"

"You'll do all that," said Charlie

grimly. "But you won't marry me?"

"Do you mind, Charlie darling?"

Charlie swore—a powerful oath with extra volume.

"What d'you think I am?" he raged.

"A gigolo on a string?"

Wide-eyed, Daphne gaped at him.

"You think I'd let a woman support me?" He knew he was hollering loud enough for Mrs. Oosterban to hear. "I don't want your money or your cars! And what's more I'm not going to be a teacher all my life! In a couple of years I'll be principal and a couple of years later I'll be Superintendent—and no crazy character like you is going to louse that all up, see?"

"Go ahead!" sobbed Daphne. "Keep yelling at me! A lot you know about it! If I marry you, I'll die—that's what'll happen, I'll die!"

FLEEING to the bedroom, she slammed the door shut.

Charlie stared at the door. Then he strode over and rapped on it. He could hear her crying. He pounded on the panel and tried the knob. It was locked.

He went back and slumped down in the easy chair. It was a long, somber day. Several times he heard Mrs. Oosterban snooping around on the porch but he ignored her.

Around five-thirty, Daphne—her eyes swollen—went to the kitchen. At six, she served dinner which they sat down to silently. The ground chuck had an interior layer of onions which was exactly the way he liked it. The peas and carrots were bathed in a rich cream sauce and the salad had his favorite thousand island dressing. There was no doubt about it. She'd make him a well wife. But that business of her dying—what a hell of a thing that was. And when he asked Daphne about it, she wouldn't answer.

Again Charlie spent the night uncomfortably on the divan. Sunday was the same as Saturday. They spoke very little and Daphne prepared three superb meals.

Monday morning, he managed to sneak out of the apartment without being cornered by Mrs. Oosterban. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that he had a free period at school.

He went into the library and took down half a shelf of books on greek mythology. By the time he'd skimmed into the second volume, he'd found what he wanted.

When he arrived back at the apartment after school, he carried a brown paper sack and wore a waggish grin. Setting down the sack, he put his hands on Daphne's slim middle and whirled her into the air.

"I've done it!" he announced, buoyantly. "I've decided to resign. When do we leave for Mt. Olympus?"

Daphne shouted with delight, flung her arms around him and gave him a kiss that rocked him to his arches.

Finally he set her down and opened the paper sack. "Now for the celebration..."

He took out three chilled bottles of champagne.

They drank the first bottle leisurely, Charlie seeing that Daphne got two-thirds of it. By the time she'd had part of the second, she was feeling absolutely no pain. Brown eyes as round and fixed as two pop bottle caps, she slid quietly off her chair and sat on the rug.

Lifting her up, Charlie kept his arm around her and guided her to the door. She was humming contentedly to herself.

When he got her loaded into his new car—a custom club coupe with a brilliant chromium roof—she propped her elbows on the dash and peered at

him crookedly over her shoulder.

"Charlie, darling," she asserted. "S'nice of you not to marry me. I think...you're a prince—I do—I really do!"

SHE WAVED a hand at him and his head suddenly felt heavy. His up-reaching fingers discovered a solid round object and lifted it off. It was five-pointed gold crown, fat with glittering stones. Charlie tossed it onto the back cushion, gunned the motor and the car leaped away from the curb.

"You never...ap'ciate me," she pouted, slumping down on the seat.

In a moment she sat up again and cheerfully gazed at the dash. She began to titter.

Across the top of the chrome dashboard crawled a platoon of furry black and orange caterpillars. Hump-backed bodies moving rhythmically, they weren't going anywhere in particular. Charlie decided to ignore them.

"Just love little caterpillars," sighed Daphne, watching them dreamily. "All those years when I was a tree...they were the only friends I had."

It was nearly five o'clock by the time they got inside City Hall and the various offices were on the verge of closing. Keeping one arm across her shoulders, Charlie managed to hold Daphne upright. By telling her the blank she was signing was an order for more champagne, he got her signature on the license.

The J.P. who married them was in a hurry to catch a train for Reno where he was divorcing his wife and didn't seem to care that the bride required a great deal of prompting from the groom.

When they arrived back at the apartment, Daphne had relaxed so completely she needed carrying. As Charlie started up the steps, Mrs. Oos-

terban ran out to block his way.

"Oh, no, you don't!" She held up one arm like a traffic cop mad with power. "You're not taking that woman back up there. You're evicted as of now! This minute!"

Charlie waved the marriage license under Mrs. Oosterban's pointed nose. He grinned as she wilted like a codfish left too long in the sun.

Entering the living room, Charlie placed Daphne gently on the divan.

It was several hours before she awoke. Charlie was on hand with the necessary cold cloths for her forehead.

"Gracious," she said, when she felt like sitting up. "What a strange nap I took."

"Yes, wasn't it," said Charlie.

He watched her nervously. "Do me a favor?"

She nodded.

"Do that leaf trick for me?"

She raised her left hand and waved the fingers. She waved the fingers again. And still again.

"Funny—" she said. She noticed his class ring loosely encircling her third finger. "Now where did that come from?"

Charlie grinned sheepishly. "Good evening, Mrs. Mills."

"What?"

The color drained from her cheeks. "But then I'll die! And have to leave you, Charlie!"

SITTING down close beside her, Charlie took her hand. "No, darling. I looked it up." He glanced thoughtfully at the ceiling. "I remember the book's exact words. Quote. Were a nymph to marry a mortal, she would die. But, forfeiting her art of sorcery, she would live on as a mortal. Unquote. So I got you tipsy and—"

Jumping off the divan, Daphne

seized a pottery leopard from the mantel and hurled it at him. It smashed on the wall beside his shoulder.

"How dare you?" she yelled. "What will my father think? How will I ever get back to Mt. Olympus?"

Charlie blinked, did a double take, and said, "But you aren't going back to Mt. Olympus."

"Who said I wasn't?"

"I say you're not. You're going to stay here and by my wife."

"Are you telling me or asking me?"

"I'm telling you—asking you—I—I'm—"

"Make up your mind."

"Don't you want to marry me?"

"No."

"Why not? If just 'might be fun."

"Your idea of fun and mine aren't the same. I like to ride on clouds and float—"

"I'll make you forget about all that."

"Besides, there's my father. You haven't asked him."

"Nuts to that. Anyway, he's not here. And it isn't your father I want to marry."

Yanking the phone from its cradle, she swung it like a black billy club.

Charlie ducked in and pinned her arms to her side in a bear hug. She tried to squirm free but he increased the pressure.

He kissed her gently on the throat. "Do you really want to go back?"

"Yes!" she said. "No!"

"Which is it?"

Daphne stopped squirming. She looked up at him. "Try that again and maybe I'll tell you."

He kissed her on the throat, this time not quite so gently.

"My," she said, pressing against him. "Who wants to go to Mt. Olympus?"



Unwittingly, Dr. Weiler had opened a door for the monster

PROJECTION FROM EPSILON

By

Gordon MacCreagh

**No greater peril ever confronted mankind.
Earth was in deadly peril from these bold
invaders. No one stood in their way except
a studious professor who couldn't see them!**

DR. KENDAL W. WEILER didn't look like a man who would premeditatedly murder anybody. Or who even could. His shoulders were frail and stooped studiously within their too shiny, once-black jacket, as though unable to bear the weight of the bulging forehead that loomed over tired eyes peering through bifocal lenses. He scribbled some more

untidy calculations on the blotting paper of his desk pad and muttered to himself in peevish frustration.

"It must lie somewhere beyond decimal eight zeros and something but before cosmic ray. Hm-mm-mm. Possibly within danger of dissolution vibrations."

Dr. Weiler looked, in fact, so much like the cartoon of a professor that it

was difficult to believe he wasn't trying to fool you into thinking he was one, and actually a very brilliant one.

Dr. Weiler never fooled anybody. But he knew that the human mind, howsoever honest, could fool itself. And, as a corollary, that if you could see through its vast ramifications of subterfuge and not let it fool itself, its capacities were, he liked to think, limitless.

Therefore with a merciless scientific ardor he pursued the facts of mental possibilities, although he well knew that they could go beyond the fringes of madness into worse and farther flung dangers. He had been through all those fascinating experiments in extra-sensory perception. He accepted the proven facts of telepathy, and having accepted, had no further interest in those and went on to explore telekinesis. Those experiments of Dr. Rhine's into the mental control of the rolling of dice or the turning of a card seemed to open up once again the long lost theories of a mind, without any physical contact, moving inert material objects. Lost, the doctor repeated in his own mind. Not unknown. And he quoted to himself out of a righteous upbringing: "If ye have faith ye can move mountains." Well, what did that mean? That certainly had not been spoken in jest. But despite that upbringing Dr. Weiler had no faith in anything. Facts, he wanted.

And why not? The answer to telekinesis, he was sure, would be found in the field of the invisible vibrations. Sound vibrations, of course, could shatter glass. Beyond the wave lengths of sound, light could affect and set in motion a thing so inert as a selenium plate. Beyond the ultra-violet then, at $L.O.000014''$, there were bands of— He was disturbed, as he concentrated on his calculations, by an out-of-the-eye-

corner fuzziness of a man easing himself into the chair beside his study door. He had heard no knock and he had not invited anybody to come in—at least, he didn't remember having done so. He turned his head, chin low to bring his upper lenses to bear and to peer through. And of course there was nobody there.

"Imagining things," he told himself peevishly. And then he angrily shook himself. That was how minds fooled themselves. He took off his glasses and wiped them, blinking the tiredness from his eyes.

BEYOND the ultra-violet, then, there were other bands of light vibrations, invisible to the human eye, though proven by photography. And beyond these again, but capable of affecting the material of brain cells must lie the wave lengths of the mind; and why should they, too, not be able to—

The theory seemed so reasonable that the doctor leaned back to rest while he speculated upon it. So reasonable that one might almost accept telekinesis as a fact and might go on into the still more fascinating field of telekdelosis—the old and very old miracle of setting up vibrations that could dematerialize an inert object and reassemble it again at will.

Miracle! The doctor caught himself up again. He didn't believe in miracles. In those old days of his scriptural upbringing it was called a miracle when somebody suddenly appeared in the midst of a gathering where doors were locked. And it seemed that certain of the Hindu Yogi were able to do it right today. Those people were just ahead of the modern skeptic world in mental science. Produce the proper vibration and—

And then there was that man again! Dr. Weiler turned quickly, his fore-

head wrinkled over the binocals, and this time the fuzziness didn't disappear. The doctor blinked his eyes tight and shook his head before looking again. The thing persisted. Distinctly a man—or a ghost. But Dr. Weiler didn't believe in ghosts. He had no facts about them as yet. Although he could see the back of the chair right through this one. It wasn't exactly sitting. It seemed to be sort of hovering in a sitting posture just above the chair as though trying to force itself into it.

The doctor took off his glasses again to wipe them—during which blindness the shadow might have been a buffalo or a fiery dragon. When he was able to look again there was now distinctly a head; an oversized head a good deal like his own; and a face, its brow screwed in intense concentration. The effort seemed to solidify the shadow and give it weight enough to settle into the chair. A vague and quite unscientific impulse of fear dissipated as the doctor could see that it was a frail thing under its big head, no more of an athlete than himself. It wore a sort of toga garment, a draped sheet sort of thing that a mahatma might carry with dignity. The doctor's unspoken thought was a compliment.

"Hmm! A type of superior evolution."

The shape, quite solid now, nodded as though it had immediately understood, and it smiled. It held itself down into the chair with its hands. With slow hesitancy it formed words, pointing with its finger to clarify.

"You—talk. I hear." The accent was that of a studious foreigner who had seen something in a book—or in a brain—but had never heard it pronounced.

The doctor talked less scientifically than he had been thinking.

"So who the hell are you then?"

The man nodded delightedly. "Talk. I must hear—sounds of—your mind."

Sounds of his mind! It made sense to the doctor immediately. It was exactly along the lines that he had been thinking. He talked, slowly and distinctly:

"I gather that you can telepathically sense the meanings of what is in my mind."

The man nodded.

"But you are unfamiliar with English. Therefore you must hear the sounds of the words that convey my thought in order that you may in turn formulate sounds with which to reply."

The man nodded eagerly again. He was already able to say, "Talk more. I adapt to your speech."

TALK WAS one of the things that Dr. Weiler could do well. He talked at great length. Lectured, as to one of his classes; though never in his classes had he found a pupil so receptive to his talk. But he could hardly say, receptive, for this man was far ahead of him in this groping science of the mind—and, it seemed, in every other science. What delighted the doctor was the astounding mnemonic capacity to catch and remember the sounds that made English words to convey the thoughts they represented. Before an hour was past the man was able to pronounce an answer to the doctor's as yet unspoken question.

"I caught your—vibration and so I was able to project myself to your radial focus." He spoke hesitantly on the less familiar terminology.

"Project yourself?" The doctor repeated it. "From where?"

"From what you would call—Let me think now. You would call it planet Epsilon in our solar system of Seknocwath. You do not see us because we are behind the dark cloud in the

constellation that you call Ophiuchus."

"But then how could you— Have you instruments to pierce the obscure dust?"

"No, no, no." The man shook head and hands. "We do not see you either. But your thought, of course, can instantly traverse any obstacle. Myself, catching your vibration, was able to transpose my own cell material into cohesive thought and follow your beam, here to reassemble myself in material form—though, as you saw, with some difficulty owing to gravitational difference."

"You mean dematerialize and then re— But then you've got it! Telekdelosis! As I have been trying to rediscover it!"

"Oh yes. Long ago. We accept it as the only possible method of interstellar communication. I am one of several from our planet who has been assigned to explore other habitable planets with a view to colonization." He cocked his big head to one side almost as though listening. "But I perceive immediately that you have jealous, and it seems rather stupid, laws to restrict immigration amongst yourselves, causing, no doubt, dissension." He smiled scientifically tolerantly over such foolish racial emotions. "It may be then, if our other explorers do not find some more favourable satellite, and since there are some nine million of us who *must* move, that we may have to—" His smile was one of cold science that has transcended emotions. "—to clear off some desirable section of this one and take it over."

The doctor missed for the moment the implications of that cold, clear off and take over by just nine million would-be immigrants, spoken as though there could be no doubt about capability as well as callous disregard for established people's rights or wishes. He

was jubilant, rather, over the prospect of this man's so far advanced scientific knowledge at hand.

"Then you will be able to instruct me—all of us—in your scientific advancements."

The man remained calm over the prospect. "We might instruct such of you as are emotionally advanced enough to accept scientific thought in its purity. If you, or some less prejudiced portion of this earth of yours may be willing to recognize our urgent need of entry."

At any other time the doctor would have been interested to recognize how this man's carefully enunciated speech reflected his own rather didactic professorialism. Just now there was vastly more important information to learn.

"Why *must* your nine million people so urgently emigrate from your planet?"

"There are many reasons." The man closed his eyes and frowned in concentration. "I find I must explore somewhat beyond your familiar orbit of thought to acquire the necessary words—into other minds, you understand. And, by the way, my name in your sounds is Sek-o-mil-ten. We, too, have a habit of shortening down to Sekten. Permit me a few moments, will you?"

IN THOSE few moments Dr. Weiler thought of a thousand other eager questions. Sekten came out of his concentration. He was as willing to lecture as was the doctor.

"Very well now. Our life conditions are controlled, as are yours, by atmosphere. We are somewhat smaller than your earth. Our mass is relatively about .80; therefore our velocity of escape is approximately 6.4 as opposed to your 7.1. It follows, then, that as we cooled we lost more of our at-

mosphere than you did. Also we have three satellites, all somewhat closer than your moon. Their gravitational pull, too, has been a factor."

This *was* quite a way beyond the familiar orbit of thought of one who was no geophysicist; but the doctor was informed enough to follow.

"We are also," Sekten lectured on, "somewhat older than you. Therefore, as our science has advanced farther, so has our process of drying out. Our waters are receding, as of course are yours also."

The doctor knew about that. "Yes, but it is going to be a long time before our dehydration causes any urgent need of retreat to some other world."

"Ah, but what you are failing to realize, my dear doctor, is the appalling correlation between dehydration and—" He said it weightily. "—de-oxygenation!"

That item, the doctor did not follow. Sekten elucidated.

"You of Earth have not felt the effects as yet; but you very surely will. For, as surface water recedes, more and more of the igneous and basic rock becomes exposed to this so unstable element of oxygen that we, as you, must have to breathe, and the combination naturally forms the ferrous and ferric oxides that are as useless as any other iron rust; and the process, of course, is cumulative according to the square of the area exposed."

"Why, er—yes. But—" The doctor was searching back into his school days for the familiar formula. "—what about the catalytic action of chlorophyl in the vegetation absorbing the carbon out of CO-2 and releasing free oxygen again into the atmosphere?"

"True. Quite true. But—" Sekten pointed a finger at the doctor almost like a threat. "Do not forget. The less water, the less vegetation! And—" His

pinched face became grim. "—there is where we, even with our advanced science, made our fatal mistake—the same mistake for which you are so blithely headed. In our war against insect pests we long ago developed efficient insecticides. Harmless, we plumed ourselves, to our form of human life." He cackled a twisted laugh. "So efficient that we completely eliminated nearly all forms of insect life." He looked at the doctor as though he had established his obvious conclusion.

"Well, er, that would seem to be rather a triumph of science, wouldn't it? We humans are prone to ask in our exasperation why God ever created insects?"

"Aa-ah!" Sekten rasped it savagely out. "So *we* conceited ourselves. We had made our Summer evenings fit to enjoy. We had rid our crops of the thousand pests that took their toll. We patted our triumphant backs." His pinched face under its domed brow contorted. "What we lost sight of was that, with the exception of a few self-pollenating plants, some ninety percent of our plant life is—I should say, was—pollenated by flying insects. We eliminated them, and with them the ninety percent of our vegetation that reproduced itself through the pollenated flower! So—!"

THIS TIME the dreadful conclusion appalled the doctor. "You mean, no green plants, no chlorophyl." He turned it around in his mind dizzily. "Therefore no replaced oxygen? Good Lord!"

"Of course," Sekten shot the finger at him again. "All those in our administration who were responsible for this criminal mistake, as it was hideously borne in upon us, were immediately disintegrated. But that punishment does not now restore a ruined world.

We who are left, subsisting upon oxygen artificially extracted from our depleted atmosphere, *must* emigrate to a new planet."

Dr. Weiler shivered. "Disintegrated? Rather drastic, wasn't it?"

"But my dear Doctor!" Sekten shrugged his thin shoulders and smiled. "You, as a scientist yourself, know that, in a question of racial survival, mistakes so deadly cannot be tolerated."

Dr. Weiler's face twisted in wry rumination. "If we were to apply that penalty to the administrators of just our national survival, I'm afraid there would be a decimation of—"

"Of course." Sekten got up from his chair and walked about the room, clumpingly in his sandal-shod feet but with an ever increasing energy. "Ah, I have to accustom myself to your slightly heavier gravity. But with the exhilaration of your so good oxygen here— As I was about to say, of course when we take over we shall immediately eliminate dangerous blunderers and shall establish a scientific regime very careful to profit by our own mistakes. We shall not again endanger our survival by any unscientific sentiment over inexcusable error."

The manifold advantages of advanced science seemed to have developed some concurrent disadvantages. The Epsilon scientist's face screwed up again in receptive concentration. "As I am saying this a thought impinges upon my focal point that there exists on your planet here a race that is emotionally advanced enough to regard, er—'liquidation', they seem to call it—as an acceptable process for the elimination of misfits. It might be, then, that those people might be glad to open their immigration doors and to profit by our advancement."

Dr. Weiler's first exhilaration over

the prospect of advanced scientific instruction chilled away to an emptiness in his diaphragm. Good Lord, if those other people should be offered an opportunity to take up this creature's merciless scientific knowledge theirs was not the kind of administration that would hesitate—not about anything. Dr. Weiler shuddered the thought away from himself. He was realizing for the first time that those petulant scientists of nuclear fission who had their tantrums about governmental restrictions were akin to children in a nursery, pouting because their plaything must not be distributed according to their own little uncontrolled whims. He felt he was guilty of a blasphemy against the whole hitherto sacrosanct theory of the freedom of Science, spelled with a capital S, when he admitted he thought that knowledge uncontrolled could be a deadly epidemic. He tried to reassure himself that all this was still possibly in a theoretical stage, just as he himself had been working on his theories.

"Well, er, have your scientists been able to get their theories accepted by practical engineers? I mean, to work out all the details of interstellar transportation for a mass emigration of nine million people?"

THE SEKTEEN face smiled as a superman in condescension. "But my dear Doctor! As I told you, we have long ago abandoned futile research into space navigation. Consider it for yourself. *We* are relatively close. In terms of your reckoning we are some seven light years distant. Your nearest, as the thought impinges upon me from somewhere, is about four, isn't it? Very well then, assuming that we could construct some fantastic space ship that could travel with the speed of light, that is to say, one hun-

dred and eighty-six thousand miles *per second!*" He laughed as he emphasized that and watched the doctor to observe if it might soak in.

For Dr. Weiler it was too stupendous a thought to form any practical picture of impossibility. Sekten went on almost pityingly:

"Your people, I hardly like to remind you, are still fumbling with their hopes of achieving mere escape at seven point one. Meteorites that enter your atmosphere at speeds one thousandth part that of light are incandesced by friction and disappear; otherwise you would be bombarded by a barrage of artillery as is your moon that has no atmosphere. You would have to live underground— Ah! I receive a thought here that you are already contemplating doing so for fear of nuclear fission bombardment."

Dr. Weiler was just staring at the man—the humanoid creature, he was calling him now; and he suddenly eeked at the hideous realization that the creature could telepathically receive the uncomplimentary thought. But Sekten was apparently tuning in on other beams to receive the vibrations of outer information. He expounded further:

"But let us for a moment disregard those very practical difficulties. Assuming that *physical* transportation might be feasible at so fantastic a speed, we would have to construct indestructible vessels somehow large enough to carry our nine million with supplies enough to last through a voyage of seven years duration!"

That one at last was getting down to figures that could be pictured. IF all the other difficulties could be overcome; and they loomed so formidably that Dr. Weiler nodded almost cheerfully over the probability that any

mass immigration would be remote. Sekten demolished his cheer, agreeing with the impossibilities.

"No, no, my dear Doctor. These things are fantasies, fairy tales for the amusement of child minds. We, as serious men of science, have long ago discarded them. Our method of travel is what you yourself have already conceived and have explored under the term derived, I perceive, into your so curiously inefficient speech from a dead language of the Greek people of some three thousand years ago. 'Tel-ekdelosis'. We establish a mental vibration that dematerializes the material body, retaining the individual thought nucleus. With no more effort, then, than thought projection we convey our nucleus to any desired location and there reassemble ourselves. The only requirement is that we find in the chosen location the same chemical elements that we left behind. Your earth fortunately possesses them in abundance."

"Good God!" said Dr. Weiler. "And, er, how long does this process take?"

"Depending upon the individual's learning and capacity for concentration, from a few moments to possibly several attempts. We can, however, assist our less literate population in achieving a reasonable percentage of success. We expect of course to lose some fifteen or twenty per cent of the more stupid ones who are incapable of absorbing assistance. Those, we would leave behind; frankly without too much regret. I assure you we shall not encumber your earth with our moronic undesirables."

HE SPOKE as though he found Earth conditions so favourable that he was already convinced his planet's elders would direct their emigra-

tion here.

"Ten or fifteen per cent?" Dr. Weiler was shocked at the two extremes of emotion and practicability. "You would leave them to your dying planet? But there'd still be some seven million of you! And frankly, Mister Sekten— Or I suppose I should say, Professor— I am sure there is no place on our Earth where you would not meet with considerable resistance to so great an influx. Why, that would completely disrupt the economic stability of any people we have."

"My *dear* Doctor!" Sekten threw out his hands and shrugged almost humanly. "We would deplore the use of coercion; for we have evolved to a peace-loving people since we eliminated war for the very practical reason that the last one we had extinguished some two and a half billion of us. But we still know how to do it if we must, and, as I have told you, our need, owing to our stupid depletion of oxygen, is imperative. We *must* find a new planet to colonize, willy-nilly."

"Two and—a half—*billion*?" Dr. Weiler sat back aghast in his chair. "Heavens! What fearful thing was it?"

"Oh, a quite simple ultra-sonic device that we discovered how to fan out over a broad area. It raised the normal blood temperature from our ninety-nine to above a hundred and ten. We found it very effective and clean within a range of approximately a hundred and fifty miles—ample to stop any antiquated bomber pilots as well as long range guided missile installations. Unfortunately both sides had it. We can, of course, dematerialize equipment and reassemble as needed."

It was then that Dr. Weiler, law abiding man of science, decided that he must murder this super scientist; that this cold conduit of knowledge untrammelled must not be permitted

to escape back to his own merciless planet with his report of Earth as an immigration colony. Nine million of them— Or seven or whatever number might be left after they had callously lost their ten or fifteen per cent of the unfit! Good God!

Dr. Weiler did not as yet know how he might avert this catastrophe. He didn't dare to think how a man might be killed who could instantly read the thought in its very forming. His blood ran cold down to his feet in a panic lest the man had already sensed the fleeting impulse that he was trying to push back into the dimmer recesses of his mind. He must not let himself think about it. He must fill his mind with other overwhelming thoughts.

He had enough of them whirling through his mind, crashing down the walls of his temples. Science, spelled as he had been wont all in capital letters, was not the supreme aim of human endeavor. The god of Science that he had worshipped, that the vast dumb peoples of the earth had been taught to revere without question, was a monster in devilish disguise. It had already shown its diabolism with nuclear fission and now came this man, this humanoid thing without a soul, to show how the idolators of his world had nurtured the Devil to rule from a cold pedestal so high that no warmth of human feeling could reach it.

How did one go about killing an omniscient devil?

How could a mere human scientist of Earth be sure that no thought nucleus would remain after a body had been killed to go back and report upon the desirability and the helplessness of Earth?

THE CREATURE'S infernal receptivity must be kept busy with oth-

er thoughts. His total effort resulted in something no less banal than,

"Of course, Mister—er, Professor, I would be honored to have you stay with me as my guest and mentor. I live here alone and—" Of course the frightful creature must stay. In order to kill anything you must have it to hand. "Er, that is to say, I suppose you do stay somewhere? Or—?"

Sekten sensed that question at once. "Yes, certainly. The effort of disintegration expends a good deal of energy and, where not necessary, it is to be conserved. I shall be delighted to accept your invitation."

"Good God! So now he had done it! He had condemned himself to live with a scientist—one worse than himself—for some indefinite period.

Well then, it would be nice to have a light snack of—I suppose you, in rematerialized form, do eat? I, ah—would like to invite you out. Unfortunately at the moment I—"

Sekten smiled like a friendly Lucifer ready to buy a soul. "You have no money in the house? It used to be a recurrent problem with our scientific men too. I am delighted to assure you that the little problem need never worry you again. Ah, I perceive that you use paper as a medium of exchange and that a depository is nearby—a bank, you call it? Very well— Oh, I ought, I suppose, to make for myself some clothing less startling to the stupid herd." He frowned in concentration, his large head and little features looking like an ageing apple beginning to wrinkle underneath. As he did so his toga dissolved away as in a movie trick and resolved again in the shape of an ill fitting suit almost an exact copy of the Doctor's. "I shall be back in just a few minutes."

The man, frail thing that he was, talked about getting money from a bank as casually as a gunman contem-

plating a hold-up with a tommy gun. Dr. Weiler devoted the whole of those few minutes to a frantic effort to think about murder, astoundingly blaming himself that his tastes in literature had hitherto scorned the lurid publications that told how murders were done.. Heavens, how inadequate was Science in matters of practical need!

Sirens were already whining when Sekten came calmly back. He emptied his shapeless bulgy pockets of bundles of money, all neatly stacked in rubber bands. "I very nearly took larger denominations for their ease of stowage," he chided the doctor. "You should have warned me they placed marks of identification upon them. Fortunately I caught the thought in the mind of a would-be too clever clerk. These are tens and twenties. Enough, I trust, to last for some of our immediate needs."

"The—sirens?" was all that Dr. Weiler was able to think. "What happened?"

They were quite stubborn about letting me have any of this material; and of course they refused to accept any threats not backed by a visible weapon. It was necessary to immobilize them."

"To—immobilize?" Dr. Weiler felt a certain measure of relief. Doubtless some super-scientific process of hypnosis or something that could strike a man suddenly dumb and submissive. "But then—those police whistles and things?" How—?"

PROFESSOR SEKTEEN of Epsilon was nonchalantly friendly about it. "I am sure we shall be able to teach some of the further advanced of you when we establish our new regime. The process is projection of a vibration that at close range temporarily paralyzes the brain cortex. It seems, though, that I have not realized just

how fragile you Earth people are. So—"

Dr. Weiler's relief shivered back to quivering tenseness. "Fragile? You mean—?" Both men spoke with the doctor's habit of agitatedly unfinished sentences.

"I am afraid so. With those four or five whom I contacted it might be permanent. Were I given time I might revive them; but your police, it seems, are extraordinarily well organized in their cruder methods and of course would never accept any explanations that I might offer."

For a hopeful second, until he could crowd the thought out of sight, Dr. Weiler thought that the police might be the people to take care of this monster of Science. But, as Sekten so casually said, in order to understand even the elements of the case they would first have to recognize their whole crude method of thought.

"In view of their hysteria," Sekten smiled. "it would perhaps be better that you—er, may I say, my colleague; or perhaps better, my pupil?—should go out alone and bring in some supplies. Since Science is above all things practical, we cannot perform fairy tale miracles. I am unable to reassemble myself in some other unrecognizable body containing different proportions of the epithelial cells."

Dr. Weiler was sweatingly glad to get away from there; to try to compel himself to think in terms of cold cuts and delicatessen salads. If this dreadful machine should pursue him with its thought— But no, it would be exploring far afield, tuning in on other waves created by people strongly vibrant enough to set up foci of attraction. "Good God!"—it shocked the doctor to a standstill. Perhaps on the foci of those other people emotionally

fitted to snatch at every cold advancement of Science and to use it as mercilessly as this one toward the advancement of their own fanatic ideology.

Down at the end of the cross street he could see the mob milling before the bank. Its murmur and the sharp commands of the police rose like a sublimated blating of sheep. "The stupid herd"! Any one of them, Dr. Weiler felt, educated in current herd "comic" literature, would be able to give him a dozen ideas about how to kill a man. How useless in an emergency was all his puny learning and his study of the potentialities of the human mind!

He harbored the mad thought of going up to one of the policemen and asking him how one might set about the murder of a telepathist who could immobilize a roomful of people by projected thought vibration? And then he snorted to himself, picturing the vacuous grunt of complete non-comprehension that would answer him. Even were he to go to headquarters and explain patiently and slowly to some slightly superior intelligence, he knew that he would be met with soothing words and would be quietly restrained until muscular attendants from a psychopathic ward might arrive.

Even if the very happiest circumstance might be his good fortune and some super F.B.I. might have a glimmer of understanding and would set about investigating this menace to the world—or at least to American national survival in case that other race might snatch to accept this devilish cult of reason unchecked—this Sekten creature would presently inevitably tune in on their joint thought wave and would either coolly paralyze their cortices or would simply disintegrate himself and wish himself back to his accursed Epailon to report that Earth

was a succulent and well oxygenated planet full of helplessly disorganized racial herds waiting to be taken over at will. The doctor shuddered. Taken and herded by superior intelligence as men herded sheep.

WHAT WAS so heart-stopping and blood-chilling about this triumph of super science was that, despite its physical frailty, it was impregnable to all humanly devised means of assault.

Dr. Weiler left the bleating clamor of the herd behind and went into a delicatessen. He was more than ever convinced that he dared not turn this problem over to crude police methods. A dreadful reward of his own studies was that he had achieved some superiority over the general intelligence and that he would therefore have to pit his own puny mind against his omniscient creature who deigned in such friendly fashion to call him colleague and to devise some means of murdering it before it might return to its atmosphere-starved homeland and project thence its nine million soulless immigrants to Earth. He shuddered to recall that Epsilon was the fifth letter of the Greek, the *enkhe* of the Egyptians, key to all their pentagrammatic magics.

When he came back to his apartment Sekten was sitting as in a trance, oblivious for a moment to his entry. At that moment any one of the "stupid herd" who knew about guns could have done the deed and then— And then the doctor's heart heaved up to choke off his breath. Good heavens! IF one could accomplish the thing, what then? What did one do with a corpse? What would a respectable psychology professor of a college tell the police about a body in a bedroom? Bitterly again he realized that any one of his pupils with their so deplorable literary tastes could

give him ~~sons~~ in the disposal of dead bodies.

Sekten shook himself out of his far-flung receptivity and tuned in on the nearer beam. He smiled with a genial satisfaction. "Refreshing," he said. "Very refreshing. I have been listening in on some of those other racial groups whom I briefly contacted before. Receptive, I find them. Most receptive to advanced thought. And it seems that they have some considerable areas of undeveloped country where they could accommodate our mass immigration. Somewhat on the cold side apparently; but we have, of course, no difficulty in adjusting our metabolism to temperature."

Dr. Weiler did not have to ask what racial thought Sekten had been listening in on; and all the rest of the world knew how receptive they were to anything at all that would help their expansion.

But a thought was beating at his brain like a hammer blow. He cringed away from it in terror lest this inhuman receiver should hear it. It was in tense little gasps that his breath ventured back into his lungs as he saw that Sekten was sitting again with his eyes closed, attuned to those distant kilocycles more pleasing than the standard American waves. It seemed logical enough that when this machine was tuned on one wave it was not receptive to another. There were possibilities in that. Possibilities that might be worked out. Probably deadly life-giving possibilities.

Sekten came back from the far short waves to the immediate present. "Ah, I perceive you have brought sustenance. It will be interesting to explore into some of your Earth's flavors. We of course have practically no vegetable material and we have long ago eliminated oxygen breathing animals."

He ate nibblingly with a little bird appetite. His sparse frame required little fuel. What brain food, Dr. Weiler wondered did that oversize head need. "Chemical pills," Sekten answered the thought. "Though we do have fish of course."

DR. WEILER kept him talking, plying him with questions, forcing his own dangerous thought about the wave lengths into the background. Sekten lectured pontifically.

Fascinating flights they would have been in any other circumstances into the ultra evolution of Science. Sekten spoke about their efficient machinery for the extraction of diminishing oxygen from their atmosphere; about their control of their sparse rain, limited to one night a week between specified hours so that all outdoor arrangements could be made accordingly; about selection of their national leaders, not through popular votes of the herd but through rigid examination to prove fitness—"Thereby eliminating the curse of politics, you understand, and stimulating impetus to study." About state control of eugenic mating between the sexes, also through written and psychiatric examinations to determine compatibility—"Thereby eliminating divorce." And Sekten smiled amiably. "We shall teach the selected few of you all this when we come and reorganize what seems to be quite a stupid chaos here."

It seemed a pity, almost a sacrilege, to contemplate the murder of so friendly a bringer of scientific gifts. But then Sekten went on to lecture about medical advances; about the elimination of disease and consequent longevity—His own age he did not exactly know. Some couple of hundred years or so. It was unimportant. About, despite their careful selective breeding, the

baffling persistence of recalcitrant genes that jumped over a generation or two and suddenly struck to produce cripples and unstable mentalities, "Which, of course, we in our desperate atmospheric deficiency cannot afford to maintain and must, ah, 'liquidate'." He loved his new word, and he quickly cocked his head at the doctor. "Which, as I say it, I perceive from you that the proportion of these non-producers in this country of yours is a most inefficient drain upon your national economy. Most unscientifically unsound."

So then of course Dr. Weiler had to cram his surging thought back into the dark recesses of his mind and to ask more questions about anything at all.

"And, er, when you sleep, does your receptivity function without your direct volition?"

"No, not actively. The tissues would exhaust themselves just as do your radio tubes; but there remains a subconscious alertness to danger or to any impulse, as we learned from the animals before we were compelled to disintegrate them. Which brings up the realization that I have had a—ha-ha—quite a long journey today and—Ah, your hospitable understanding, my dear Doctor, is admirable."

He had as ponderous a sense of humor as any other professor of science.

The product of coldly efficient scientific evolution accordingly slept securely in the spare bedroom, impregnable still, unapproachable, guarded by an alertness stolen from dumb animals. The while Dr. Weiler fearfully wondered whether he might permit his own mind now to continue its furtive excursion into some means of saving his way of life from efficiency's menace.

The super mind functioned, it was

(Continued on page 126)

you think we'd better go with the man?"

"I have only orders for the girl," the man said quickly.

Marcia seemed to have become paralyzed from fright. With an effort she aroused herself, slipped into her coat and went out with the man, not even deigning to look at John.

John followed almost immediately, hugging the doorways and keeping out of sight as he followed the two. The street was deserted except for them.

He turned and saw John coming rapidly toward them. He reached in his pocket.

John shot once and the man dropped to the ground, a neat round hole in his forehead. In an instant John was on him. He dragged the body into a passage between two buildings. It was filled with the accumulated debris of years. It was the work of minutes to conceal the body effectively.

"Listen," he said. "If you want, I'll struggle you aboard the ship and by late tomorrow night we'll be in deep space. We'll never see Terra again. This mad Euphorian dream will end for you." John took her abruptly in his arms and got his answer.

This Amazing New Discovery
IS GUARANTEED to Help You

STOP SMOKING IN JUST 7 DAYS

If the tobacco habit has really "got" you — if you have tried time after time to stop and can't — then try this remarkably effective new discovery. Just chew pleasant-tasting Y-Smok? Gum. It contains a combination of harmless, laboratory-developed ingredients that actually curb your desire to smoke. Proved in clinical tests. Safe and economical. Chew Y-Smok? every time you feel urge to smoke and note astonishing results at once.



SEND NO MONEY

Y-Smok? MUST help you cut down on your smoking or quit entirely in one short week or it COSTS YOU NOTHING! Simply send name and address and we will forward generous week's supply of Y-Smok? Gum. Pay postman only \$1.98 plus few cents postage on delivery. Or send \$2 and we will send Y-Smok? postpaid.

Write: Y-SMOK COMPANY,
Dept. ZF-1 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.



PIN-UP GIRLS KIND YOU'LL LOVE

Gorgeous beauties in delightful poses. Fascinating figures. Photographed as you like it. A collector's joy. 20 DIFFERENT 4x5, hi-gloss pin-ups, sent prepaid for \$1.00 in plain sealed wrapper. No C.O.D.s.

NATIONAL, Dept. 578, Box 5-Sta. B, Toledo 9, Ohio.

AMAZING BOOK BARGAIN!

SEVEN SELECTED FULL-LENGTH ADVENTURES!

"FANTASY BOOK NO 1"

LEADING AUTHORS!

Coblentz... van Voigt... Bloch... etc. These prominent authors always bring exceptional thrills—and this book includes their best work. You'll enjoy every word of these seven fantastic masterpieces!

BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED

By such well-known artists as Austin, Murphy and McNutt.

EXTRA LARGE SIZE — 9" x 11 3/4"

25¢

(WHILE SUPPLY LASTS)

DON'T MISS OUT ON THIS
OUTSTANDING OFFER!

Get an envelope right now... enclose the coupon below along with only 25c in coin (no stamps please)... and soon you'll have your PERSONAL paper-bound copy of this extraordinary book.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

CONTENTS

- PEOPLE OF THE CRATER—By Andrew North
Fantastic, weird adventure beyond compare!
- FLIGHT THROUGH TOMORROW—By S. A. Coblentz
Across space and time to a shocking climax!
- BLACK LOTUS—By Robert Bloch
A taste of the forbidden ecstasy...en then—
- MICRO-MAN—By Weaver Wright
The amazing little man from the Land of Mortia.
- STRANGE ALLIANCE—By Bryce Weitan
Do werewolves still roam when the moon is full!
- WALLS OF ACID—By Henry Hasse
A new thrill in advanced science-fiction!
- THE CATAAAAA—By A. E. van Voigt
A thing from space reveals strange facts in a world a tale as ever has been told by this master of fantastic adventure.

READERS' SERVICE BOOK CLUB

119 E. San Fernando Street, Dept. Z-2
San Jose 13, California

Here is my 25c... Rush my copy of FANTASY BOOK No. 1 by return mail.

Name

Address

City State

apparent, on the principle of a mechanical radio. Tuned to a certain beam, it did not receive the next, even though only a few vibrations apart. If then Dr. Weiler could contain his murder plans within some other wave length? He explored the possibility, shrinking up in his bed as he heart-stoppingly wondered whether that animal alertness in the next room might pick up a danger signal and he would be suddenly blasted by a retaliatory wave that would paralyze him, or immobilize him, or just disintegrate him away to a formless thought nucleus—make a homeless ghost of him. There seemed suddenly here an acceptable theory for the existence of ghosts. But the doctor resolutely shook the intriguing digression from himself; he had other more desperately important possibilities to consider.

THE TROUBLE with planning a murder along lines of some different wave length was that, after all, it would all be within his own beam; and if the receiving brain were talking to him, listening in on him—“Damnation!” Dr. Weiler’s tenseness flared up to what he had always loftily derided as the futility of swearing. There must be some way through this impregnable armor. Perhaps Dr. Rhine with whom he had worked on extra-sensory perception might be able to—but no. He could not dare to risk delay while he might contact Dr. Rhine. This guest of his was too unpredictably dangerous. He might at any moment decide to just wish himself out of here and into the realm of those other minds whom he was already favourably looking upon as better emotionally fitted to accept his scientific advancement than was the current American mode of thought. By every means, then, the thing would have to be done *now*! Or

at least tomorrow morning, before the danger might with nonchalant ease escape.

If he could but think of some means of diverting the receptive vibrations—of distracting them—jamming the wave. Thank God his study had been what he had admired as the infinite processes of the mind. If this super-mind should have happened to swoop down on somebody else—some mere official, perhaps, of the national defense who could think only along lines of material explosives—But then there it was. Had it not been for his own reachings into the science of telekinesis this monstrous peril would never have contacted Earth at all. Good God, what a fumbling thing was his futile Science!

Dr. Weiler accordingly planned and plotted through the night. At intervals his whole being shrank itself down to hide, listening for a wakeful movement in the other room, expecting to feel himself dissolving away into nothingness. He hoped it would at least be painless.

Nothing happened. No paralysis. No immobility. Morning came. Dr. Weiler had hatched a meager plan. By no means a fool-proof one; no more than a desperate hope that his theory of jamming the wave might distract that dreadful receptivity for long enough to—The man had told him that it took a few moments of concentrated thought to disintegrate a body. If he could not complete his murder within those few moments it would probably be his own body.

Not only in a few moments, but in the *next* few moments. Dr. Weiler in his ordered contemplative life had never been called upon to come to a decision and to act upon it so fast. He gulped dryly. He wished he had any one of his students here. In the matter

of translating thought into action their reflexes excelled his by priceless seconds. Any one of them could take gun or knife and kill him while his scientific mind was yet thinking about it. How fast could super science retaliate?

Sekten came to breakfast in a most genial mood and immediately confirmed the doctor's worst surmises. He sat down, sniffed exploratively at coffee, fingered the loaf of bread, his mind already occupied with the frightening thought.

"You know, my dear Doctor, I have been thinking quite a good deal about that other race of your Earth's. Their thought processes seem to run along lines more cooperative with our own than do yours. I am planning accordingly to go and—"

SO THEN it would have to be NOW!

This monster might decide even before tasting breakfast to disintegrate its frail body and giant brain and project them with the speed of thought half way round the world.

Dr. Weiler forced his thought into his mind. The plan of distracting the receptive mechanism. He had prepared it almost into a speech through the night. He could visualize the words.

The information you have, he compelled himself to think, is too valuable to be permitted to be given to any possible racial enemy. It will be necessary to put you into the hands of the security police for detention.

It was futile of course. Dr. Weiler knew well enough that science so advanced as this man's could shock the police into immobility, or at the man's callous pleasure into death. But it did impinge upon the receptive vibrations as a distraction. Sekten's great head perked up to look at the doctor, for a moment surprised, then derisively pitying.



The Adventures of Lily!

GAY AND GIDDY!

SPICY AND SAUCEY!

BOLD AND BRASSY

FULL OF FUN AND FROLIC!

Never a dull moment with Lily, the modern hoyden. Not since Amber, Kitty and Dutchess Hotspur has there been a woman like Lily. Read her adventures for the raciest stories since Rabelais.

SEND \$1.00 postpaid

JUFF PUBLICATIONS

2995 Botanical Square, New York 58, N. Y.

Juff Publications, Box Z

2995 Botanical Sq., New York 58, N. Y.

I enclose \$1 for my copy of "The Adventures of Lily", to be sent postpaid.

Name

Street

City Zone State

HYPNOTISM

Books, courses, magazines, folios, etc. Everything for the amateur and professional from the World's Largest Hypnotism Organization. Literature free.

DR. REXFORD L. NORTH

26 St. Botolph Street (Dept Z) Boston 16, Mass.

DID YOU KNOW

that King David started it.—The ancients believed the Devil played it.—It was considered witchcraft for centuries,—and that today, this simple instrument which produces the most beautiful harmonic music without human aid, will amaze and mystify everyone! No electrical, moving, or costly parts,—just set instrument down and it will be played forever by unseen hands. Rare, unique,—your friends have never seen one. Send \$3.50 for complete history and construction details.

VICTORIA P. O. Box 25
Price Min. Sto. 5, Cincinnati, Ohio

BOOKLETS

The kind grown ups like. Each one of these booklets is POCKET SIZE, also contains 8 ILLUSTRATIONS, and is full of fun and entertainment. 12 of these booklets, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid in a sealed wrapper upon receipt of \$1.00, or 24 BOOKLETS, ALL DIFFERENT, shipped prepaid for \$2, cash or money order. No orders sent C.O.D. PRINT NAME AND ADDRESS & Mail to:

TREASURE NOVELTY CO., Dept. 36-C.

2 Allen St.

New York 2, N. Y.

Order this blue steel model Automatic Pistol, Safe, accurate and hard hitting. Easy to carry. Very smooth action. \$2 cal. \$27, or \$30 cal. \$35. Send only \$3 with order. Cartridges free for cash in full. Holster \$2.75.

WINEHOLT CO.

Box A17, Woodbine, Penna.





Illustrated COMIC BOOKLETS
THE KIND GROWN-UPS LIKE!
Brand New Series, Clear Illustrations,
Packed with Fun & Humor
10 for \$1.00, 24 for \$2.00
FREE Gift with each \$2.00 order.
No C.O.D.

(VEST POCKET SIZE)
V. M. ROGERS
DEPT. F7, BOX 14738
CIMARRON STATION
LOS ANGELES 16, CALIF.

ILLUSTRATED BOOKLETS & NOVELTIES

Our VEST POCKET series of ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS are the kind that are fully illustrated with comic characters. The Noveltyies are the kind you want for Entertainment and Amusement. 16 Different booklets and 4 Different noveltyies sent prepaid in sealed envelope on receipt of \$1.00. No C.O.D. orders or checks accepted. Wholesale Price List included with orders only.

LIVE WIRE NOVELTY CO., Dept. 168-C
3 Orchard Street New York 2, N. Y.



TELL FORTUNES
Your own... Your friends... with playing cards. The fortune tellers' secret messages, printed on stickers for each card with layout chart. Only \$1.00
No C.O.D.

JATCHA Box 607 Newark, N. J.

WHY CAN'T YOU ADVERTISE?

This is one inch of advertising space. It Costs only \$8.96 and reaches more than 133,500 readers. For complete information write to Fiction Group, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 183 N. Wabash Avenue, Chicago 4, Ill.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING

Song Poems

POEMS Wanted. Collaboration. Free Broadside. Pioneer Song Co., 22-41 N. W. 8th., Oklahoma City 2, Okla.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

IMPORT, export! Opportunity, profitable, world-wide, mail order business from home, without capital, or travel abroad. Established world trader ships instructions for no risk examination. Experience unnecessary. Free details. Mellinger, 173, Los Angeles, 24.

Miscellaneous

SCARCE, unusual books located. Phil Green, 982 Legett Ave., N. Y. C.

FEEL uniforms & supplies. Big profits. Write: Hook Fast, Dept. 210, Roanoke, Va.

WINTER in Florida! Work in Miami! Many jobs now open. List \$1. Box 33, Tamiami Starline, Miami.

SCIENTIFCTION, weird, fantastic books, magazines, Werewolf Bookshop, Shannon Rd. R.D. 2, Box 88, Verona, Pa.

"INTERESTING Mails."—25c will keep your mail box full three months. Bentz, Jr., Desk H-72, Chatsworth, Miss.

ADDRESS envelopes! We pay cash! Outfit, 25c! Hines, Spring Valley 6, N. Y.

RECEIVE big mail. Your name listed free. Box K-105, Salmon, Idaho.

"But my dear Doctor. Surely, after this even brief acquaintance, you do not underestimate my—"

Dr. Weiler forced himself to act on his deeper thought. To act without thinking about it. He had schooled himself to the fearful thing all through the night. To perform a reflex action in response to a given stimulus.

He snatched up the bread knife and stabbed blindly at his guest. It was a weak stroke, ill delivered by an un-muscular arm, not even scientifically aimed. But it struck flesh and penetrated. A muscular man would have cursed it off and immediately stabbed the assailant to the ground. But Sekten was even more scientifically frail than was Doctor Weiler. He jerked to a spasmodic scream.

"Why, you treacherous—I shall—"

Dr. Weiler stabbed madly again. He found himself brutally exulting to a realization that he was not suddenly shrinking away to nothing. It seemed possible that his puny mind had outwitted his semi-god of super mentality. He was conscious of blood red upon his white table cloth. Again he desperately poked the knife at the sagging little shape. No super-fantastic thing happened. No explosion. No crippling wave of mind force. The shape just sagged and moaned and sagged on down to the floor. Blood, not much of it, oozed from more holes in the body than Dr. Weiler knew he had made.

Then he sagged himself. He slumped dizzily into a chair. Swallowing his heart down. Shuddering. Desperately clinging onto his mind to keep it from slipping into screaming hysteria. Even more desperately watching the frail little body for further movement, for any sign yet of life. No force that he knew of could make him go nearer and investigate to make sure. It was

enough, and he gratefully thanked God for it, that he had had force of will enough to kill a man. He knew his moment of primitive man triumph. And why not? It was his muddling meddling into this telekdelosis theory that had opened the door for this monster. It was his responsibility to get rid of it and he had risen to the ordeal and done it.

And now there it was! His murder! It lay there. He looked at it and was fearfully glad. Only the killing of the thing could save the fumbling planet Earth from the emotionless domination that planet Epsilon would have brought. And nobody but himself, Dr. Weiler, student of mental projection, could have done it. He turned away, weak, trembling, eyes closed.

He went back wearily—it queerly shocked him—as he had heard that murderers did to the scene of their crime.

And there was no crumpled body there!

Dr. Weiler's breath rasped like a pneumonia in his throat. "God save us!" He stared at the place on the floor. There was nothing. Though yes, there was still the blood. On the table cloth too. The doctor looked around with a sudden apprehension. But no. No vengeful frail shape menaced him from behind. A worse fear assailed him. Had he entirely failed? Was the thing physically invulnerable too? But no again. Had it been, it would not have bled. Had there been just life enough left to will the dematerialization vibrations and project itself back to its hideously scientific home and report that— But a third time no. That one would surely not report that Earth was a nice planet to colonize. Dr. Weiler permitted himself to suck in a long breath of hopeful relief.

THE-END

DOUBLE-HONED DOUBLE-GROUND

100 blades — \$1.00

- Fine Surgical Steel
- Money-back guarantee
- Why pay more for so called "name" brands

"BLADE MART"

950 WHITBY ROAD
CLEVELAND, OHIO

How to Build Your Body without Exercise!

New booklet reveals tested secrets of body building.

No apparatus or weights. Completely safe, proven method. Results guaranteed. Send only \$2.00 * for booklet.



*Calif. residents add 3% tax.

LACY INSTITUTE

Box 510Z

Whittier, California

BRITISH SCIENCE-FICTION FOR DOLLAR BILLS!!

Send 1, 2, 3 or more Dollar Bills for Sample Supply of British Science-Fiction-Magazines, Pocket Books, Bound Volumes, according to number of Dollars sent. Free Catalog of British and American Science-Fiction.

MILCROSS BOOK SERVICE, Dept. AMS,
205 BROWNLOW HILL, LIVERPOOL, 3, ENGLAND.

TREASURE MAP OF U.S.

It's here at last! Your complete treasure guide to the 48 states, Canada and Mexico. This extra large (26" X 42") exciting map is literally crisscrossed with buried treasures, lost mines, sunken galleons, hidden caches, etc., and fully locates and describes each one. No more guesswork—actually see where \$300,000,000,000 lies hidden—where fortunes are recovered each year—where gold objects are found without digging. Beautifully illustrated, this unique map is a "must" for treasure hunter, adventurer and hobbyist. \$2.00.

VICTORIA Dept. Z P. O. Box 25
Price Hill Sta. 5, Cincinnati, Ohio

HYPNOTISM

Learn to apply this tremendous POWER. Develop will-power, self-confidence, self-control. ANYONE can master this exciting, profitable profession in short time by training at home, with GUARANTEED RESULTS. DON'T DELAY... Write to America's oldest Hypnotic school for free information now-today!

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED HYPNOLOGY
Dept. 163, 120 Central Park So., N. Y. 19, N. Y.

QUIT TOBACCO!

Remove tobacco craving safely in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco and a safe reliable home method. A proven success for 40 years.

GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.

Box 148

Dept. F.G.

Dalhousie, Texas.



**TERRY
THORNE**

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

FOR GROWNUPS ONLY (Vest Pocket Size)
A NEW, DIFFERENT LINE OF COMIC BOOKLETS
for Adults. Loaded with FUN & HILARITY. Good
Clear Illustrations. 20 Booklets all different
Sent Prepaid for \$2.50. No C.O.D.s please
Box 15535, Crenshaw Sta. Dept. F7, Los Angeles 8, Calif.

PERSONAL POWER MONEY, HEALTH, HAPPINESS

All can be yours when you use Nature's unfailing law. Let our
revealing manuscript, "LIVE JOYFULLY, FINANCIALLY,
ABUNDANTLY" be your guide to better living. Information
6c, or send 10¢ for lecture on self-advancement.

VIRILLO

Box 507-K, North Hollywood, Calif.

STOP TOBACCO



Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Reformer. Write
Today for free booklet telling of injurious
effect of tobacco and of a treatment which
has relieved over 300,000 people.

In Business Since 1909

THE NEWELL COMPANY
284 Clayton St. • St. Louis 8, Mo.

FREE
BOOK



ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

**THE KIND MEN LIKE
THE GIRLS LIKE IT TOO!!**
(VEST POCKET SIZE)

They are loaded with rare cartoons. Full of Fun and Humor.
20 DIFFERENT booklets sent for
\$1 in plain wrapper. No C.O.D.

BULCO, Dept. 430 Box 382-K, G.P.O., N.Y.C. 1

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other
NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4 1/2 x 2 1/2 and is fully
illustrated. We will send 24 assorted booklets prepaid
upon receipt of \$1.00 or 60 assorted booklets sent
prepaid upon receipt of \$2.00. Wholesale novelty
price list sent with order only. No orders sent C.O.D.
Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC SALES CO., Dept. 140-C

1 Orchard St. New York 2, N. Y.



OWN a Business

If employed, start part time. Alert dealers can
gross \$1 hourly profit on own service plus \$3
on EACH serviceman. Clean, revive, mothproof
rugs & upholstery on location. No shop needed.
Services nationally advertised. Repeat customers.
Easy to learn. Quickly established.
Easy terms. Send today for FREE booklet.
No obligation.

RURACLEAN CO. 3-373 Crenshaw Blvd., Doorfield, Ill.

Read "SEX HYGIENE IN THE HOME" written
in frank, factual language by a Ph. D.
Price \$2.00 (Includes Postage) Send Check or Money
Order to —

Luron Company of America, Inc.,

487 Park Avenue, New York 22, N.Y.

(Cont'd From Page 101)

"Oh, hail!" he said, and kicked the 'flitter
into a one-eighty turn. "I've got to take
another look."

He put his 'flitter down beside the
other machine. The girl was pitted im-
mobily against the side of her own 'flitter.
The tentacled "snaker" had looped
her gun-arm rigidly within its coils and
her left hand was a rigid bar trying to
fend off the beaked mouth of the mon-
ster. Her eyes were wide with fear and
horror and the realization of impending
death. There were long ugly marks along
her side and shoulder where the scaled ex-
terior of the snaker had scaped and cut
her. The little wisps of clothing she'd worn
were torn away. She was the antithesis of
everything, Matriarchal. Here was no self-
determination, no skill, no assurance, no
masculine equality. Here was only helpless
femininity.

Frank reacted immediately. His beamer
cut the head from the monster in one ac-
curate blast and the girl collapsed into
the oozing mud as the dying beast re-
laxed. The scent of blood was causing oth-
er stirrings and rustlings in the darkness
beyond the 'flitter's lights.

Frank bent over and picked up the
girl. She clung fiercely to him. "Oh," she
moaned, "please take me away, please..."
Her voice trailed into a sob and she pressed
tightly against him.

Twenty minutes later they had reached
the hut. By this time the girl was be-
coming conscious of her hurts and her
nudity and Frank wasn't sure which bother-
ed her more. After a hot shower she
came out wrapped in an improvised robe.
She said nothing.

"Come here," Frank ordered, "let me
take a look at those cuts. I think you'll
need a shot of *toler*. That anti-biotic will
knock out any infection."

"Look," he said after a while during
which they were sipping the warming liq-
uid. "I can't tell you what to do, but
you'll be making a mistake if you go back
to the Matriarchy. Why did you go there
in the first place?"

The girl raised her eyes and looked at
him squarely. Her face colored. "My moth-
er said...I felt that..." she hesitated.
Suddenly she was in his arms, sobbing.
"I don't know...I don't know..." she said
over and over again. "It's a dream..."

Frank held her closely. He was smiling.
"Don't worry," he whispered gently against
her hair, "you're here now, at the Matri-
archy is far away. You don't have to go
back."

The girl glanced up at him. Convulsively
she pressed closer to him. "I don't want
to go back," she said softly, "hold me closer."

Frank held her closer...